

 HARLEQUIN[®]

Desire

How did keeping things professional
get so complicated?

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**BRENDA
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DUTY OR DESIRE



THE WESTMORELAND LEGACY

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THE WESTMORELAND LEGACY

How did keeping things professional *get so complicated?*

What happens when a man of unshakable conviction *meets the woman who rocks his world?*

Pete Higgins is an honorary Westmoreland, a man of his word—of course he'll put duty to his orphaned niece first. Too bad the temporary nanny is tempting him with every look. Myra Hollister captivates him. But she's keeping dangerous secrets, the kind that remind Pete of all he's lost before and what he can't afford to lose again...

***New York Times* Bestselling Author Brenda Jackson**

“There’s another matter I want to discuss with you.”

“Oh?” she said, switching her gaze from his to smile down at Ciara. “And what matter is that, Sheriff?”

“Our relationship.” When he realized how that sounded, he quickly said, “Our *working* relationship. I think I need to define it.”

He saw the way her brows scrunched up. “Why?”

Pete drew in a deep breath and then said, “We will be living under the same roof. I’m a single man and you’re a single woman.”

“And?”

“People might talk, Miss Hollister.”

She looked even more confused. “Why would they? Why would anyone have anything to say about you hiring a temporary nanny until Miss Bonnie returns?”

He shifted in his seat. “Like I said. I’m single and so are you.”

“So is Miss Bonnie.”

“I’ve never had a *young*, single and beautiful woman living under my roof before.”

She was more temptation than he’d bargained for.

* * *

Duty or Desire is part of
The Westmoreland Legacy series
by *New York Times* bestselling author
Brenda Jackson!

**Selected praise for *New York Times* and
USA TODAY bestselling author Brenda Jackson**

“Brenda Jackson writes romance that sizzles and characters
you fall in love with.”

—*New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author Lori
Foster

“Jackson’s trademark ability to weave multiple characters and
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exciting.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

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a woman that he’s willing to give her what she believes is her
heart’s desire? The Westmoreland clan will claim even more
fans with this entry.”

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Brenda Jackson

Duty or Desire

 **HARLEQUIN**[®] DESIRE
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Brenda Jackson is a *New York Times* bestselling author of more than one hundred romance titles. Brenda lives in Jacksonville, Florida, and divides her time between family, writing and traveling.

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Acknowledgments

To the man who will forever be the love of my life and the wind beneath my wings, Gerald Jackson, Sr.

To all my readers who love the Westmorelands and their friends.

To my sons, Gerald Jr. and Brandon. Please continue to make me and your dad proud. I love you guys.

To my family and friends who continue to support me in all that I do.

Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

—Matthew 7:7

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Prologue

The doorbell sounded and Bane Westmoreland wondered who the latecomer could be. All his family and friends who'd been invited to celebrate his and his wife Crystal's housewarming party were accounted for.

Upon opening the door he found an older couple, in their late sixties, standing there with a baby in their arms.

Bane was certain he did not know the couple. "Yes, may I help you?"

The man spoke. "We hate to impose but we were told Peterson Higgins was here tonight. We are the Glosters, his deceased brother's in-laws."

Bane nodded. "Yes, Pete is here. Please come in."

The man shook his head. "We prefer not to, but we would appreciate it if you could tell Peterson we're here. We would like to speak with him. We will wait out here."

Bane nodded again. "Okay, just a minute." He circled around the room before finally finding Pete in a group in the family room.

"Excuse me, guys, but I need to borrow Pete for a minute," Bane said to the others. Once he got Pete aside, he told him about the older couple waiting outside. Pete placed his cup of punch aside and quickly moved toward the front door.

When Pete returned about half an hour later, he was carrying a baby in one hand and a diaper bag in the other. Everyone's attention was drawn to him when the baby released a huge wail.

It seemed all the mothers in the room hurried toward him.

"Whose baby?" Bane's cousin Gemma was the first to ask, taking the baby from a flustered-looking Pete.

"This is my nine-month-old niece, Ciara," he said, noticing how quickly the baby girl quieted once Gemma held her. "As most of you know, my brother, Matthew, and his wife, Sherry,

were killed in that car crash six months ago. This is their daughter. Sherry's parents were given custody of Ciara when Matt and Sherry died. But they just gave me full custody of her, citing health issues that prevent them from taking proper care of her. That means I'm now Ciara's legal guardian."

Pete looked around the room at the group he considered family and asked the one question none of them could answer.

"I'm a bachelor, for heaven's sake! What on earth am I going to do with a baby?"

One

Five months later

“I hate that I’m leaving you like this, Pete, but my sister needs me.”

Sheriff Peterson Higgins stared at the older woman standing across the kitchen. He’d known something was wrong the minute he walked through the door.

Well, he had news for Bonnie. He needed her, too.

Pete suddenly felt like a class A bastard for thinking such a thing after she’d just tearfully explained that her sister had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Of course he understood her wanting to go be with her only sister during this time. Even if her leaving would put him in a bind, the last thing he wanted was for Bonnie to feel guilty about going to her family. Somehow, he would find the right person to live-in and keep his fourteen-month-old niece while he worked.

Of course, that person couldn’t really replace Bonnie.

Bonnie McCray had been his mother’s best friend. When Renee Higgins had died, Pete had been sixteen and his younger brother Matthew twelve. Renee had asked Bonnie to always be there for her sons and Bonnie had kept that promise. And when Pete’s father passed away three years later, Bonnie wouldn’t hear of Pete not fulfilling his mother’s dream of him completing college. Bonnie and her husband, Fred, agreed to look after Matt while Pete studied.

It had been hard going to college full-time and making sure the cattle ranch his father had loved remained productive. Luckily, his two best friends, Derringer and Riley Westmoreland, had a huge family of cousins and brothers who’d pitched in and helped out. They also made sure Pete hired the best people to help run things while he attended university.

After he completed college with a degree in criminology, he discovered ranching wasn’t in his blood but a career in law

enforcement was. He found out ranching wasn't in Matt's blood either when his brother went into the military immediately after high school.

Even so, Pete refused to sell the ranch that had been in the Higgins family for generations. Instead he leased part of the two hundred acres to sharecroppers, and for the other parts he hired a foreman and ranch hands. That freed Pete up to work for the sheriff's office, a job he'd secured after college thanks to Riley's oldest brother, Dillon Westmoreland.

Pete loved his career, and the ranch was making plenty of money, which he'd split with Matt before Matt's death.

A pain settled around Pete's heart when he remembered the phone call almost a year ago telling him Matt and Sherry had been killed in a car crash. Luckily, three-month-old Ciara hadn't been with them. It had been Matt and Sherry's "date night" and the baby had been at home with a sitter.

Sherry's parents, who lived in New Hampshire, had wanted full custody of Ciara and Pete had seen no reason not to give it to them. Matt had adored his in-laws, thought they were good people who treated him like a son instead of a son-in-law. Besides, Pete knew with his bachelor lifestyle, the last thing he could manage was taking care of a baby. When Sheriff Harper retired a few months before, Pete had been selected to replace him. That meant his plate was fuller than ever.

Things had been working out and he'd made a point to call and check on his niece every weekend. He enjoyed hearing about the development of her motor skills and how much she liked to eat.

But five months ago, out of the blue, Sherry's parents had shown up in Denver to say that health issues meant they needed him to serve as guardian for his niece. They assumed his bachelor days wouldn't last forever and they thought a much younger couple would have more energy to raise their granddaughter.

At thirty-six, marriage was the last thing on Pete's mind. However, he gladly gave his niece the love, attention and care he knew Matt would have wanted him to.

Now at fourteen months, Ciara Renee Higgins was ruling the Higgins household, and Pete was glad Bonnie had been there to help out as a full-time nanny. Her husband had passed away a couple of years ago and with her only son living on the East Coast, Bonnie had welcomed the opportunity to take care of others again. As far as Pete was concerned, she'd been a godsend. He honestly didn't know what he'd have done without her and wondered what he would do now that she would be leaving.

"May I make a suggestion, Pete?"

For a minute he'd been so deep in thought he'd forgotten Bonnie was standing there, waiting for him to say something. "Yes."

Bonnie smiled as she placed a serving tray on the table with soup and a sandwich. His lunch. He made a habit of swinging by the ranch at noon each day to spend time with Ciara. Although Bonnie's job was to take care of Ciara, she always prepared lunch and dinner for him, as well. Where did she find the time to do such things? On the days when Bonnie returned to her own home, Pete took care of his niece by himself. Ciara required his full attention and would let him know when she felt she wasn't getting enough of it. It was only during her nap time was he able to grab a nap of his own.

"Hopefully, I won't be gone any more than two months, and I know of someone who could replace me."

He doubted anyone would be able to replace Bonnie. "Who?"

"A woman I met a couple of months ago at church. She recently moved to the area and she and I have become good friends."

He nodded as he walked over to the table to sit down and eat. "Where is she from?"

"Charleston."

He chuckled. "Good grief. Don't tell me we have another Southerner invading these parts. Bella is enough."

Bella was married to his friend Jason Westmoreland. Everyone thought of her as a real Southern belle. From the time she'd arrived in Denver it had been obvious that she was a woman of refinement. It didn't take long for word to spread that she was the daughter of a wealthy business tycoon in Savannah, Georgia. Although Bella had adjusted well, at times she still looked out of place amidst the bunch of roughnecks in these parts.

Bonnie placed a small salad near his sandwich. "Yes, another Southerner." She then poured iced tea into his glass.

He looked up. "Thanks. And what makes you think she will be good with Ciara?"

"Because she taught prekindergarten for a few years and before that, she worked with younger babies in a nursery at a hospital in Charleston. She's had us over for tea several times. I always take Ciara with me and the two of them hit it off. You of all people know how Ciara can be."

Yes, he knew. If his niece liked you, then she liked you. If she didn't, she didn't. And she normally didn't take well to strangers. "What makes you think she would be interested in keeping Ciara until you return?"

"Because I asked her," Bonnie said with excitement in her voice. "I didn't want to leave you with no one at all, and then not with just anyone."

He appreciated that. "When can I meet her, to see if she'll be a good fit?"

"I invited her to lunch."

Pete paused from biting into his sandwich. "Today?"

Bonnie smiled. "Yes, today. The sooner you can meet her, the better. I would worry sick the entire time I'm in Dallas if you and Ciara weren't taken care of properly."

At that moment the doorbell sounded. "That's probably her," Bonnie said, smiling, as she swiftly left the kitchen.

Pete began eating his sandwich, curious about the woman Bonnie was recommending. He figured she would be around

Bonnie's age, which meant she could probably cook. Having home-cooked Southern dishes once in a while was a nice thought.

"Pete, I'd like you to meet Myra Hollister. Myra, this is Sheriff Peterson Higgins."

Placing his glass down on the table, Pete stood and turned to offer his hand to the woman, then froze. Standing in the middle of his kitchen beside Bonnie was the most gorgeous woman he'd seen in a while. A long while. And she was young, probably no more than twenty-two or twenty-three. She had a petite figure and was no more than five-three. She appeared even shorter than that when standing across from his six-three height.

She had skin the color of rich mocha and features so striking he felt like he'd been struck in all parts of his body. Perfect hazel eyes stared back at him and a smile curved a pair of delectable lips. Fluffy dark brown bangs swept across her forehead and a mass of curly hair fell past her shoulders. When he finally moved his gaze from her face it was to check out the legs beneath her dress. They were as gorgeous as the rest of her.

He couldn't ignore the spike of heat that caught him low in the gut. The power of her femininity surrounded him, actually made his heart skip a couple of beats. He wanted to groan in protest.

"It's nice meeting you, Sheriff Higgins. I've heard a lot of wonderful things about you," the woman said, offering him her hand. Her Southern accent was just as perceptible as Bella's.

"Thanks," Pete replied, fighting back a curse. The moment their hands had touched, a hard hum of lust had rushed through his veins.

Bonnie wanted him to hire this woman as a live-in nanny? She had to be kidding. There was no way he could do that, even on a temporary basis. This was the first woman he'd been attracted to since Ellen.

That placed him in one hell of a dilemma.

* * *

Myra Hollister tried hiding her excitement at possibly being hired as Ciara's nanny. She adored the precious little girl she'd gotten to know. And when Bonnie mentioned her need for a replacement, Myra had been glad to help. It would certainly solve some of her own problems for a while.

First off, she would get a salary, which meant she wouldn't have to touch her savings. And since her lease ended next month, moving in here was great, too. Hopefully without her own address, her brother wouldn't be able to find her. The latter was the most important thing and would definitely buy her the time she needed before returning to Charleston for a face-off with Baron.

"How old are you?"

Sheriff Higgins's question reeled her concentration back in. "I'm twenty-four but will be turning twenty-five on Christmas Day."

Myra studied his very handsome features, which she'd noticed the moment she'd walked in. She figured he was either thirty-five or thirty-six, which would put him at Baron's age. She'd encountered good-looking older men before. Her brother's friends were all eye candy and, like him, they were all womanizers who thought women were good for only one thing. Long ago she figured it must be an age thing. Even Baron thought that way and he'd been married to Cleo almost four years. She loved her sister-in-law and regretted how Baron and his mother, Charlene, were treating her. Myra was convinced Cleo would have left Baron long ago, but he swore he would fight her for custody of the kids if she left him.

Pushing thoughts of Baron from her mind, Myra placed her concentration back on the man standing in front of her. He had chestnut-colored skin, broad shoulders and long legs that looked good in his pants.

He also had a gorgeous pair of dark brown eyes that seemed to be staring at her in disapproval. Why? Although this was

what she considered an informal interview, she had dressed appropriately. She was wearing one of her church dresses with heels.

And why had he asked about her age? Hadn't Miss Bonnie given him a rundown of her credentials and experience? What was the issue? She could tell by the frown on his face that there was one.

Automatically, she slid her hands to the back of her hair and fluffed it away from her neck, something she did whenever she was nervous. And she shouldn't be feeling nervous, not when she was qualified for the job. If truth be told, probably overqualified.

"You're a lot younger than I thought you would be," he finally said, after staring her down. "Sorry, but I don't think you'll work out."

Myra blinked. He didn't think she would work out?

She was being dismissed because of her age? Maybe now was the time to remind him that there were such things as discrimination laws, but then she figured that would only make the situation worse. She glanced over at Miss Bonnie, who was giving the sheriff a shocked stare.

Deciding to reassure him, because she truly needed the job, she said, "I don't consider myself too young to care for your niece, Sheriff Higgins. I've worked at a day care and also in the nursery at the hospital. And once I finish my thesis, I'll have my PhD in child psychology."

If Myra thought that information would impress him, then she was wrong. He remained expressionless when he said, "All that's nice, but I regret you wasted your time coming here today."

Although she didn't understand what was going on, all she could do was take the man at his word. Besides, he might think of her as young, but she was strong. Only a strong woman could have put up with her brother's foolishness for the past six months and not have broken. Fighting back the anger she felt, she said, as politely as she could, "I regret

wasting my time coming here today, as well. Good day, Sheriff.”

Giving Miss Bonnie an appreciative smile, she added, “I can see my way to the door.” Then Myra turned and walked out of the kitchen.

* * *

“Would you like to tell me what that was about, Peterson?”

It wasn’t the tone of Bonnie’s voice alone that let Pete know she was upset with him. She never called him Peterson. “I stated it already and there’s nothing more to tell. I thought the woman you were recommending was an older woman, closer to your age. She’s way too young,” he said, before sitting back down to the table to resume eating his lunch.

“Too young? For heaven’s sake, she’s nearly twenty-five. Women her age are having babies every day. How can you think she’s too young when you’ve gotten Charity Maples to babysit for you a few times and she’s only seventeen?”

He shrugged. “The key word is *babysit*. I don’t need a young nanny working for me. Have you forgotten I need a *live-in* nanny?”

“At the moment what I think you need is your head examined. Myra Hollister is more than qualified to be a nanny, and what’s the problem with her living here while taking care of Ciara?”

He didn’t say anything and then he wished he had come up with something. If he had, Bonnie might not have slung out her next accusation. “You’re afraid, aren’t you? You’re afraid that a young beautiful woman will remind you to live again.”

He glanced over at her, which wasn’t hard to do since she’d come to stand by the table. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I am living.”

“No, you’re not—you’re breathing. I, more than anyone, know that a part of you stopped living the day Ellen died. It’s been twelve years, Pete.”

Every muscle in Pete's body tensed. He, of all people, knew just how many years it had been. A man would not forget the day his fiancée died when she was thrown from the horse she'd been riding. Pete doubted he would ever forget that day for as long as he lived.

A man had come into the dress shop where she worked a month earlier and tried flirting with her. She'd told him she wasn't interested and was engaged to be married. He had begun stalking her and Ellen hadn't told Pete anything. Then the man had intentionally thrown a firecracker to spook her horse. At least he'd been arrested and was still serving time for Ellen's death.

"I know how long it's been, Bonnie. What's your point? You act as if I don't date."

"Yes, you date, though rarely."

She was right. However, his excuse was a good one. He was too busy. Besides, some women saw a man in a uniform as a trophy to win and he didn't intend to be a prize in any contest. He sighed as he shifted his gaze from Bonnie to the window.

Bonnie moved around the table to stand by him, intentionally blocking his view. She stood there, a force to be reckoned with, her hands on her hips, giving him that infamous Bonnie McCray glare.

"You've just dismissed your best prospect for a nanny. I didn't even know about that thesis for her PhD. That makes her more than qualified."

He drew in a deep breath. "What do you even know about her?"

"She's living in Denver temporarily, trying to deal with grief. Her parents died a few months ago while vacationing in Morocco. The tour helicopter crashed."

"That's tragic," he said, shaking his head, feeling bad for the woman. Losing both parents at the same time had to be hard on a person. He recalled years ago when the same thing had happened to his best friends, Derringer and Riley Westmoreland. The cousins had lost both sets of parents the

same day in an airplane accident. He recalled how devastating that had been.

“Yes, it was tragic,” Bonnie was saying. “Her family owns a huge corporation in Charleston, but she’s not in the family business or anything.”

“How did she decide on Denver?” he asked,

“Someone she knows from college owns a house here and she’s leasing it for six months.”

He nodded. “Well, I wish her the best, but like I said, she’s too young to stay here. I’m sure there are other women out there. An *older* woman I can hire to live here as a nanny.”

“Myra could live here as Ciara’s nanny, Pete. Don’t think I don’t know why you’re behaving the way you are. I’ve got eyes. I knew the moment she walked into the room that you were attracted to her.”

He wouldn’t bother denying anything because he’d learned long ago that Bonnie didn’t miss a thing. “And what if I am? I’ve been attracted to women before.”

“Yes, and the few you’ve dated were women you deemed safe. For some reason you’re afraid if a pretty young woman like Myra got underfoot that she might thaw your frozen heart.”

First she accuses him of breathing instead of living and now she’s saying he has a frozen heart.

His heart wasn’t frozen. He just wore a thick protective shield around it. Pete refused to ever go through the pain he’d felt when he lost Ellen. Pain that could still creep up on him even now, twelve years later. Had Ellen not died, they would be married by now with a bunch of kids and living in this very house where he’d been born. They would be happy, just as they’d been that day when they’d been sixteen and had decided to be boyfriend and girlfriend forever.

Forever...

For him, forever was still going on. It hadn’t died the day Ellen had.

“Have you forgotten about that dream you shared with me, Pete?”

He didn't have to wonder what dream she was talking about. “What does that dream have to do with anything?”

She sat down in the chair beside his. “Because in that dream you said your hands had been tied and Ellen was untying them for you. Not only did she untie them but then she tried to push you out some door.”

A part of him now wished he hadn't shared any details about that dream with Bonnie. But he had done so mainly because it had bothered him to the point where he'd awakened in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. He'd gotten up to go into the kitchen, needing something to drink and found Bonnie in the living room, sitting in the chair, rocking Ciara back to sleep. While downing a glass of lemonade, he had told Bonnie about his dream and she'd listened and said nothing.

It had been the next morning when she'd told him what she thought the dream meant. Ellen was trying to release him, free him from all the plans they'd made together. She wanted him to enjoy life. To live and love again. To do more than just breathe.

Pete sighed deeply. He hadn't accepted Bonnie's interpretation of the dream then and he wouldn't accept it now. “I don't want to talk about that dream, Bonnie.”

“Fine, Pete. But you need to accept that I'm leaving and your niece needs a nanny. I honestly don't think you're going to find another person more qualified than Myra Hollister, especially not in two weeks.”

He slid back his chair to stand. “I intend to do just that, Bonnie. I'm determined to find someone more qualified.”

He had to.

Two

Myra looked up from reading the morning paper and sipping her herbal tea. She tipped her head to stare at her cell phone. It was ringing and she didn't recognize the ringtone. Granted, she hadn't assigned a specific sound to everyone who called her. Only those that mattered. She was about to ignore the call and then remembered it might be Sheriff Higgins.

She had run into Miss Bonnie and Ciara at the grocery store two days ago and had been so glad to see them. Ciara's chubby arms had automatically reached for her and she'd been happy to hold her. That had been the first time she'd seen Miss Bonnie since that day a week ago when the sheriff had turned down her employment as a nanny.

According to Miss Bonnie, the position hadn't been filled and she felt the sheriff would come to his senses soon enough and realize Myra was the best candidate.

Deciding to appease her curiosity, she clicked on the phone. "Hello."

"Gosh, Myra, you had me worried there for a minute."

"Wallace? Why are you calling me from another number? One that I don't recognize?"

Wallace Blue had been her father's protégé. The man Elias Hollister had groomed for years to replace him at the company whenever that time came. At least her father had the good sense not to make Baron his successor, recognizing at an early age that her brother lacked the skills, knowledge and compassion to ever head a company the size, depth and magnitude of Hollister Enterprises.

Her father thought his only son's lack of character stemmed from Baron having been raised by his mother, who'd been Elias's first wife. He thought Charlene had raised her son to be just as callous, calculating and cruel as she was. Myra hadn't known just how true those allegations were until her involvement with Rick Stovers.

She should not have been surprised that Baron's behavior would get worse after her parents died unexpectedly. The first thing Baron had done was go after Wallace, who'd been in place to head the company. Rumor had it that Baron, along with his devious mother, had gotten to the stockholders after obtaining damaging information on their pasts. Baron and Charlene had threatened to expose the information if the stockholders didn't vote Wallace out and put Baron in as Myra's father's replacement.

"It's a burner phone and I wanted to check to make sure you're okay," Wallace was saying. "Your brother is more devious than ever and I think he might have put a tracker on my regular phone. He's desperate to find you."

Myra could believe that because in two months, when she turned twenty-five, the entire company became hers and there was nothing Baron or the stockholders could do about it. It was Baron's intention that she not show up at that meeting where she would take control of the company, appoint Wallace as the CEO and show Baron the door. How he planned to stop her was anyone's guess, but she didn't want to take any chances.

"I can't understand why you're still working there," she said.

"Because while I'm here I can make sure Hollister Enterprises stays profitable until it's time for you to take over. Otherwise, Baron will bankrupt it. All Baron's friends are working here and they don't know what the hell they're doing."

Myra believed Wallace. Her father had said often enough that Baron had no business sense and as far as Myra was concerned the men he hung out with, mostly frat brothers, were just as bad. "Well, let Baron continue to look for me. I think this is the last place he'll think to look. According to Cleo, he thinks I'm somewhere in Spain, which is why Charlene tried to have my passport revoked so I couldn't return to the States."

“Don’t put anything past her, Myra. Over the years she’s been known to have bed partners in some pretty high places.”

Myra could believe that. Baron even bragged about his mother’s past lovers and how she could get some of them to do just about anything for her. Baron and Charlene disliked Wallace because they saw him as taking Baron’s place in Elias’s life. Baron and Wallace were nearly the same age, and yet as different as day and night. Wallace, whose father had been Elias’s best friend since childhood, always carried himself with professionalism and honesty.

“So, what’s going on with you?” Wallace asked her, breaking into her thoughts.

She shrugged, not surprised he’d asked. She considered him the big brother Baron had never been. “Not much. Paula needs to turn this house back into an Airbnb for the holidays, so I’ll be moving out in a week.”

“And going where?”

“Not sure. There’s a woman I’ve met who relocated from Savannah,” she said, thinking about Bella Westmoreland. “She owns a private B and B. I plan to talk to her about moving into one of the rooms there for two months. Just till Christmas. I told you why I’m avoiding hotels.”

“Yes, because Baron could trace your whereabouts if you don’t,” Wallace said. “I just hate you’re on the run like this. If your father was alive, he—”

“But Dad isn’t alive, Wallace, and we need to carry out his wishes like he would want us to do. I’m fine, just a little inconvenienced.”

She and Wallace knew the truth. She was being inconvenienced a whole lot. It was never her desire to get tied to the family’s business. Her father had always respected her decision. But she’d known, because he’d told her, that if anything happened to him and her mother simultaneously, the company would become hers. He’d instructed her to make sure Wallace was CEO so he could run things. And that was what she intended to do. Her twenty-fifth birthday couldn’t get

here soon enough. Now, if she could only stay hidden from Baron until then.

“You still working on your thesis?” Wallace asked her.

She moved back to the table to sit down. “Yes, but not as much as I should.” Then, because she wanted to share her disappointment with someone, she said, “I interviewed for a nanny position last week.”

“That’s great. How’s that working out for you?”

Knowing Wallace figured she’d gotten the job, she said, “I wasn’t hired. The guy thought I was too young.”

“Too young?”

“Yes. I think he was looking for an older, matronly woman.”

“Too bad, it’s his loss. You’re good with kids and would have been a great nanny.”

She believed that, too. At that moment her doorbell rang. “Thanks. I have to go. Someone is at the door.”

“Okay. Make sure you check to see who it is before opening it, Myra.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you later.” She clicked off the phone and headed for the door.

* * *

Pete couldn’t believe he was here, but it had taken his best friend Derringer Westmoreland to help make him realize that just like Bonnie had said, Myra Hollister was the best person to be nanny to Ciara. Besides, he was running out of time.

Bonnie would be leaving town next week and so far, the women he’d interviewed had been so lacking in certain skills he’d quickly shown them the door. Then there had been Ciara’s reaction to each of them. She had taken one look and started screaming her dislike.

According to Derringer, Jason’s wife, Bella, and Myra Hollister had become friends. Bella had invited Ms. Hollister to one of those Westmoreland family chow-downs, something

the Westmorelands got together for every Friday, and the one thing they'd all been amazed about was how the Westmoreland kids had taken to Myra and she to them. It was as if she was a modern-day Mary Poppins.

Something else Derringer had said had helped Pete see reason. If he truly wanted what was best for Ciara, then he would get the best. It would be up to him to keep things professional between him and his nanny. He had to agree with that. All he had to do was remember his relationship with Ms. Hollister was strictly business.

He intended to make sure it stayed that way.

So here he was on Myra Hollister's doorstep with Ciara in tow. It was his day off and he hoped Ms. Hollister was still interested in the job. He glanced down at his niece who was smiling happily at him.

Suddenly the door opened and Myra stood there with a surprised look on her face. "Good morning, Sheriff Higgins."

He was about to ask if he could come in when Ciara released a happy scream and all but jumped out of his arms into Ms. Hollister's. He tightened his hold on his niece as she tried twisting out of his arms.

"You can let her go. I have her," Myra Hollister said. Ciara not only went to the woman but wrapped her arms around her neck as if Myra Hollister was her lifeline.

He'd seen the interaction between Bonnie and Ciara numerous times and had seen the bond developing between them over the months. But he hadn't been prepared for this, although he'd been forewarned.

"Hey there, Ciara, how are you, sweetie?" Myra asked her, and that's when Ciara pushed back to look up at the woman while smiling brightly.

Myra Hollister lifted her eyes over Ciara's head to look at Pete, who could only stare back at her. Today she looked even younger. The legal drinking age in Colorado was twenty-one, and he could see her getting carded easily. Few would believe she was twenty-four without proof. She was wearing her hair

down and around her shoulders as she had the other day, and he wondered if the curls were as fluffy as they looked.

“Would you like to come in, Sheriff Higgins?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” she said, stepping aside for him to enter, propping Ciara on her hip.

“She’s heavy,” he said, reaching for his niece once they were inside. Again Ciara rebuffed his outstretched hands and clung to Myra.

“She’s fine. Come in by the fireplace. Glad to see you have her dressed properly.”

“Of course,” he said, taking off his Stetson and hanging it on the hat rack by the door.

It was October and the temperature was below freezing. Did she think he didn’t know to dress his niece for the cold weather? Granted, he would admit Bonnie had made it easy for him by laying Ciara’s clothes out the night before.

“Would you like something to drink, Sheriff Higgins? I have tea, hot chocolate and coffee.”

When she sat down on the sofa with Ciara, he sat in the chair across from her. “No, I’m fine.”

He knew from Bonnie that Myra was leasing this home. He liked the community and recalled it had once been his area to patrol when he was a deputy. The people were friendly and because of a neighborhood watch program, crime had been practically nonexistent.

“I want to apologize for my behavior the other day. I didn’t mean to offend you.” He decided to get it out there. He wished he wasn’t noticing how good she looked sitting there in her leggings and pullover sweater. Or how at eleven o’clock on a cold Monday morning she reminded him of a bright ray of sunshine.

After removing Ciara’s coat, hat and mittens, she adjusted his niece in her lap, looked him dead in the face and said, “Yet you did offend me, Sheriff.”

He blew out a slow breath. He needed to explain his actions as best he could while leaving out a couple of vital details. Like his intense attraction to her. He'd hoped it had been a fluke, but when she'd opened the door just now, he'd seen that it hadn't been. At least he was doing a better job of controlling his reaction today than he had last week.

"I apologize for offending you. When Bonnie told me about you, I assumed you were an older woman. I hope you can understand my surprise when you walked into the kitchen."

"Even if I wasn't what you expected, I'm sure Miss Bonnie told you about my qualifications. I still don't understand why there would be a problem even if I'm considered *young* to you. I used to work in a day care. I worked in a nursery at a hospital taking care of newborns and I'm getting my PhD in child psychology. What else did you need, Sheriff?"

He had to tighten his lips to keep from saying he didn't need anything else, but it would help tremendously if she didn't look like a goddess. And then, as if things needed to get more interesting, his niece took hold of the front of Myra's sweater. That caused a dip in the fabric, exposing a generous portion of Myra's cleavage. He nearly swallowed his tongue when he said, "I don't need anything else. I think that would do it...if you're still interested."

She didn't say anything for a moment, like she was mulling it over, trying to decide. Then she said, "Yes, I'm still interested."

He felt relief at that. "Good. However, there are a few questions I need to ask to finish the interview process."

"Ask away."

"First, I want to offer my sympathy in regards to your parents. Bonnie told me what happened." He saw the sadness that appeared in her eyes. She and her parents must have been close. A cop was trained to read people even when they didn't want to be read.

"Thanks, Sheriff."

He wished he didn't have to ask the next question but there was no way around it. She needed to know what her working environment would be like. "You will need to move in with me for two months." He paused, deciding he didn't like the way that sounded. "Let me rephrase that."

"No need," she said, smiling. "I know what you meant. And yes, I'm aware that because of your unorthodox work hours, I'll have to move into your place as a full-time nanny to Ciara. In fact, moving into your place works better for me."

He lifted his brow. "Why is that?"

"Because my lease on this place expires in a week, and I would have had to find someplace else to stay. I won't have to do that if I move into your place to take care of Ciara. Then around the time Miss Bonnie will be returning, I'll be heading back to South Carolina."

He nodded. She was right. It would work out well for her. That meant she would leave Denver around the holidays. She'd mentioned her birthday was on Christmas...just like his.

She shifted positions on the sofa and Ciara shifted with her, without taking her eyes off the flames in the fireplace. Funny, she'd never been so attentive to his fireplace. Then he saw the colorful flames emitting from the logs. He smiled his understanding about why such a thing was holding his niece's attention since it was now holding his.

"Did you know, Sheriff, that babies have the ability to recognize colors at eighteen months?" Evidently she noticed he was staring at the flames as much as Ciara.

He glanced back at her. "Is that a fact?"

"Yes. However, I suspect Ciara has a jump start since it's quite obvious she can detect colors now. I also suspect it won't be long before she notices similarities and differences in shapes, sizes and texture of objects."

He nodded again. "She's already begun talking and thinks I'm her daddy. She's even called Bonnie Momma a few times."

"Does that bother you? That she calls you Daddy?"

He had to be honest that yes, it did. “I don’t ever want her to forget Matt and Sherry.”

She shifted in her seat again, in a way where Ciara could still keep her gaze on the flames. “Can I be blunt with you, Sheriff?”

He nodded his head. “Yes.”

“Chances are she’s already forgotten them.”

His jaw clenched and unclenched. He preferred she not say such a thing because he definitely refused to think it. “You don’t know that.”

A hint of sadness appeared in her eyes. “Yes, I do. She was only three months old at the time of their accident, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then what she remembers most is their scent.”

Although he didn’t want to agree with her, he knew what she said made sense. “Like I said, I don’t want her to forget them.”

“What you mean is that you want her to remember them.”

As far as he was concerned, it meant the same thing. Evidently she didn’t think so, but he refused to spar with her. Besides, there was one other thing they needed to cover before he felt totally comfortable hiring her.

“When Ciara gets older,” she continued, “around three years old, that would be a good time to begin establishing her parents’ likenesses into her memory with pictures. There’s nothing wrong with her calling you Daddy. When she’s old enough you can tell her the truth.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. Instead of appreciating her insight, he resented it. He was hiring her as a nanny, not a social worker. He and Ciara would do just fine without her dotting every *i* and crossing every *t* for them.

“There’s another matter I want to discuss with you.”

“Oh?” she said, moving her gaze from his to smile down at Ciara. His niece had finally gotten bored of the fire and was

glancing around the room. Myra Hollister held Ciara firmly in her arms and he was amazed that Ciara hadn't given her any pushback. Usually, she was ready to get on the floor and move around to see what she could get into. The Higgins household had gone through a lot of changes since his niece began walking three months ago.

“And what matter is that, Sheriff?”

“Our relationship.” When he realized how that sounded, he quickly said, “Our *working* relationship. I think I need to define it.”

He saw the way her brows scrunched up. “Why?”

Her words pretty much confirmed she honestly didn't have a clue. Maybe that was a good thing. But still, he needed to make sure they had an understanding about a few things.

“Why do you think you need to define our working relationship, Sheriff?” she asked again.

Pete drew in a deep breath. “We will be living under the same roof. I'm a single man and you're a single woman.”

“And?”

“People might talk, Ms. Hollister.”

She looked even more confused. “Why would they? I'm sure people around here know your profession. You're the sheriff. You're also the guardian to your niece. Why would anyone have anything to say about you hiring a temporary nanny until Miss Bonnie returns?”

He shifted in his seat. “Like I said. I'm single and so are you.”

“So is Miss Bonnie.”

Pete frowned. Was she deliberately being obtuse? “I've never had a *young*, single and beautiful woman living under my roof before.”

She stared at him for a moment and then cocked a brow. “Although I don't consider myself one of those real proper Southern belles, I was raised to adhere to conservative

protocols. Is there something about your reputation that I need to be concerned with, Sheriff?”

Her question threw him. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re evidently worried about my reputation and what people will think with me living in your house.”

Is that what she honestly thought? “I assure you there’s nothing questionable about my character.”

“And I assure you there’s nothing questionable about mine. And as far as anyone suspecting something going on between us while we’re living together, that is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“And why is that?”

She rolled her eyes. “First of all, you’re not my type. Second, you’re older than anyone I normally would date.”

Well, damn. She’d pretty much put him in his place by telling him she was not in the least attracted to him. There was only one thing he could say. “I’m glad because you’re not my type either, and you’re younger than the women I’d typically date.”

“Great! Then we don’t have anything to worry about. I honestly don’t care what people might say or think about me living with you. However, if you’re concerned about what they might say, then I suggest you find yourself another nanny.”

* * *

Myra meant what she’d said, although she could understand why someone would think she could fall for the sheriff. After all, he was a very handsome man. Instead of being dressed like a lawman, today he was wearing jeans and a Western shirt. When she’d looked out the peephole and seen him earlier, standing on her doorstep, tall, broad shouldered, ruggedly built with a Stetson on his head, she’d drawn in a deep breath to slow her pulse. He was her idea of a Denver cowboy ready to go off and tame a bunch of wild broncos.

But the bottom line, handsome or not, she could not and would not be attracted to him. She could appreciate a man's good looks without losing her mind over him; especially an older, good-looking man, thanks to her bad experience with Rick.

But she couldn't deny the sensations that had gone off in her stomach when Pete had described her as young, single and beautiful. Did he really think she was beautiful? And why did the idea of him thinking such a thing give her a warm feeling? She couldn't let his words, or her reaction to them, go to her head.

Her time in Denver was limited and like she'd told him, she would be returning to Charleston in a couple of months. But she'd stay there just long enough to boot Baron out of the company and return Wallace to his rightful place as head of Hollister Enterprises. Then she intended to take a monthlong vacation in Paris. She would definitely deserve it.

"I see I've offended you again."

She glanced over at him and her stomach contracted. Why did he have to look regretful and sexy at the same time? "Yes, you have. I'm beginning to think you enjoy doing that."

"I assure you I don't. I just didn't want you caught off guard. You're new here and I know this town."

She nodded. "And I guess that means you have a reputation to uphold, and I understand that. Well, guess what? So do I. But obviously you think your reputation means a lot more than mine."

"I never said that."

No, he hadn't insinuated such a thing, but she also hadn't given much thought to them sleeping under the same roof until he'd made such a big deal out of it. "Like I said. If you're worried about what people think, then I'm not—"

"I'm not worried." He stood and she watched how he easily slid out of the chair to stand up to his six-three height. "You will work out fine if you still want the job."

He then offered her an amount that was a lot more than what she had figured on earning. That would certainly help keep her tucked away from Baron until she was ready to return home. “I accept your offer, Sheriff. Will I be expected to do laundry and cook, as well?”

He lifted a brow. “Can you cook?”

She lifted her chin. “I can hold my own. I can’t cook as well as Miss Bonnie, but considering how *young* I am, Sheriff, I might surprise you.”

“You’re not going to let me forget about the big deal I made with your age, are you?”

“No time soon,” she said, unable to hide her smile.

She looked down at the little girl she held in her arms, deliberating over placing her concentration on Ciara before she looked back at him. “But that’s your hang-up, Sheriff. I’m sure you will get over it. I’m looking forward to taking care of Ciara until Miss Bonnie returns.”

“I’m glad.”

He smiled for the first time since she’d met him. All she should have seen was a friendly smile, but when his lips had curved, she was struck with a spike of feminine awareness. Why had his smile caused that reaction in her?

She didn’t know. The best thing to do was to get rid of him to ponder the reason in private. She stood after putting on Ciara’s coat, hat and mittens. “So, I guess that’s it. I will be reporting to your place on Friday. That will give Miss Bonnie a chance to help me get acclimated to Ciara’s schedule and my duties while she’s gone.”

“Do you need help moving out of here?” he asked, glancing around. She watched him while every hormone in her body seemed to sizzle. And all because he’d *smiled*?

“No, I don’t need any help. Most things here belong to the owner, who is a college friend of mine. I just need to pack my clothes.”

“Okay.” The sheriff reached for Ciara and seemed disappointed when his niece’s head dropped back against Myra’s chest, as if she wasn’t ready for Myra to relinquish her.

He tried again. “Come on, Ciara. We need to leave before the weather gets any worse.”

When his words wouldn’t budge his niece, he then said, “We’ll have cookies to eat when we get there.”

Evidently mentioning *cookies* had been the magic word since Ciara extended her arms out for him. The sheriff threw his head back and laughed while cradling Ciara close.

Myra’s heart skipped, and she knew why. Baron had twin girls and he’d never shown them that much compassion. Yet he hadn’t thought twice about threatening to take custody of them just to hurt Cleo.

“Looks like you know how to handle her, Sheriff Higgins.”

He chuckled. “I do my best. And from here on out I prefer for you to call me Pete.”

She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat caused by the deep, husky sound of his voice. “And please call me Myra. I’ll see you to the door.”

At the moment, she didn’t care if it seemed as if she was rushing him out. Mainly because she was. All the man had done was smile. She didn’t quite understand her reaction, and she was never good at dealing with unknowns.

But when they reached the door and Ciara looked at her beneath her fluffy little cap, Myra was a goner. In truth, the little girl had captured Myra’s heart the minute Myra had held her. She refused to think about what could happen to Ciara if she was left with the wrong nanny. Unfortunately, not all nannies were dependable and competent.

“We will see you on Friday.”

Myra met Pete’s gaze over Ciara’s cap. “Yes, you will see me Friday. I should arrive by noon.”

“Good. We’ll be waiting.”

Once again his deep, husky voice played havoc with her ears, sped up her heartbeat and tempted her to close her eyes. Moments later when the pair had left and Myra had closed the door behind them, she leaned back against it and drew in a long, deep breath.

“I will *not* be attracted to Sheriff Peterson Higgins,” she said aloud, issuing the command to her brain and expecting her body to cooperate. Opening her eyes, she drew in a deep breath, confident that her brain and body now understood each other.

* * *

Pete had barely made it inside his house before Bonnie began grilling him. “How did it go? Did she still want the job? Do you feel comfortable about her being here? Did you hire her?”

He placed his Stetson on the rack before turning with Ciara in his arms. Bonnie didn’t waste any time taking his niece from him.

“Things went well, and yes, yes and yes to your other questions.”

Bonnie smiled. “I knew things would be all right once you talked to her yourself.”

Pete wasn’t sure things would be all right, but he’d gotten tired of unintentionally offending Myra and figured he needed to stop while he was ahead. Bottom line, she was qualified to take care of Ciara and anything else would be up to him to keep in check. He knew now more than ever that doing such a thing wouldn’t be easy. Sharing space with her even with Ciara with them had been hard. He’d been aware of every breath and every move. How would he handle her being here with him in this house alone?

If anything, what she’d told him should help. He wasn’t her type and was too old for her liking. He shouldn’t be offended by her comment since he was the one who’d made such a big deal of the age thing. But he had news for her; the twelve-year difference in their ages didn’t mean a damn thing. Bonnie had reminded him that his own father had been ten years older than

his mom, and old man Arnold was fifteen years older than Ms. Viola and they'd been married for close to seventy years.

Pete wondered why he was wasting so much thought on this issue. The important thing was that he and Myra had an understanding. Well, sort of. Deep down he believed she felt the entire subject had been ridiculous since she wasn't the least bit interested in him, and he shouldn't be the least bit interested in her.

But he was, though. The best thing to do when she moved in was to stay out of her way and make sure she stayed out of his. His home didn't have split levels. His master suite was at the end of a long hall and Myra should have no reason to venture that far down the hall since the bedroom she would be using had its own private bath and Ciara's room was next door to hers. There was another guest room and his office next to Ciara's room.

On the other hand, he would have to walk down the hall and pass by both bedrooms to get to the living room and other parts of the house.

"When will Myra be moving in?"

"We agreed on Friday. That will give you time to pack and take care of things you need to handle at your place since you'll be gone for a while. If you need me to do anything while you're gone, let me know."

"I will and I appreciate it." Bonnie glanced down at Ciara who'd fallen asleep in her arms. "Let me lay her down. It's not even her nap time yet. What did you do to her to tire her out?"

"I didn't do anything. In fact, once she saw Myra Hollister, Ciara forgot I was alive."

Bonnie chuckled. "You sound jealous."

Did he? Was he? Possibly. He wasn't used to Ciara being so taken with anyone she wasn't accustomed to seeing on a regular basis. "I have no reason to be jealous, Bonnie."

"Oh, by the way," Bonnie said as she headed down the hall, "Zane's here checking on the horses. Told me to tell you he would stop by before leaving."

“Fine.” Zane was one of Derringer’s older brothers. Although he was a married man now, Zane once had a reputation as one of Denver’s most notorious womanizers. But then so had Derringer and Riley. Only difference was that Zane’s reputation had been a lot worse. He’d also been dubbed an expert when it came to women and was known to give out advice on the topic.

Pete removed his jacket before walking over to the window. Snowfall was predicted tonight. He couldn’t wait until Ciara got older and he could build a snowman with her like he’d done with Matt while growing up. Those had been fun times when both of their parents had been alive and their only worry was making sure their homework was done before going to bed.

He saw a movement out the window and recognized Zane walking toward the house. Zane, Derringer and their cousin Jason were partners in a lucrative horse breeding and training business, along with several of their Westmoreland cousins living in Montana and Texas. The partnership was doing extremely well financially, with horse buyers extending all the way to the Middle East. One of their horses, Prince Charming, had placed in the Kentucky Derby a few years ago. Since then, potential clients had been coming out of the woodwork in droves. As a result, they’d needed more land to hold the horses. Since Pete had more property than he knew what to do with, he’d leased a portion of it to the Westmorelands.

Pete had never sought out Zane for advice on the topic of women before, but maybe he should run this situation regarding Myra by Zane. Hell, doing so couldn’t hurt.

* * *

Myra glanced around her bedroom. Although she had four days to pack, there was no use waiting until later. Like she’d told Pete, she didn’t have much stuff and the majority of her items could fit into her luggage.

Pete.

She couldn't stop remembering the exact moment he'd suggested she call him Pete instead of Sheriff. She knew his real name was Peterson but that he had been called Pete since he was a baby. That information had come from Miss Bonnie, who'd told her a lot about him.

Myra also knew he'd been engaged once and his girlfriend from high school had died just weeks before their wedding. She'd been participating in a local parade when she was thrown off her horse.

Myra had been saddened by the story and a part of her heart had gone out to the man who'd lost the love of his life so close to their wedding day. That had been twelve years ago and she wondered if he was now seriously involved with anyone.

She picked up her phone when it began ringing, recognized the ringtone. "Hello, Bella."

"Myra, how are you?"

"I'm fine. What about you?"

"Doing okay but I hear there will be a snowstorm beginning tonight. I hope you're prepared," Bella said.

"I am. Besides, staying inside will give me a chance to work on my thesis."

"How is that coming?"

"Great. I'm hoping to turn it in around this time next year."

"That's outstanding. Another reason I'm calling is to invite you to the Westmorelands' chow-down on Friday night."

"Oh, thanks for thinking of me again, but I'm moving on Friday."

"Moving?"

"Yes. I've been hired to be Sheriff Higgins's temporary nanny while Miss Bonnie is away."

"That's wonderful. You'll be perfect, and Pete will go to work each day knowing Ciara is in good hands. The girls will be disappointed not to see you on Friday."

Myra laughed when she thought of Bella and Jason's twins. She had won them over, along with a few other Westmoreland kids, with her magic tricks when she'd attended their Friday night chow-down a few weeks ago.

"Well, I'm going to have to pay them a visit once I get settled at the Higgins place. Then I can bring Ciara along."

"Oh, they will enjoy that, and we'll look forward to your visit."

* * *

"So, what's on your mind, Pete?"

Pete glanced over at Zane Westmoreland, whose long legs were stretched out in front of him as he took a sip of his beer. His wife, Channing, was expecting their first child and yet Zane had just finished telling Pete that *Zane* was the one craving stuff.

"I need your expert advice on something."

Zane lifted a brow. "What?"

"Not sure if you heard that Bonnie's sister has cancer and she needs to be in Texas for about two months."

"Yes, Bonnie mentioned it when I first got here. I told her that I was sorry to hear that."

"Her leaving means I have to hire a nanny until she returns. I found one, a woman name Myra Hollister, but I detected possible problems."

Zane raised a brow. "What kind of problems?"

"She's a very beautiful woman."

Zane nodded. "I met Myra a couple of weeks ago when Bella invited her to one of the Westmoreland chow-downs, and you're right, she's a beautiful woman. She's also single and so are you, so what's the problem?"

"She's younger than me by twelve years."

"And?"

Pete took a sip of his own beer. "I want things to remain professional between us while she's living here."

Zane lifted a brow. "Why wouldn't they? Or, why *should* they if you're attracted to her?"

Pete frowned. "Who said I was attracted to her?"

Zane chuckled and then shook his head. "Oh, you want to be one of those, do you?"

"One of what?"

"A man in denial."

"I'll admit to being attracted to her. A little."

"A little?" Zane shook his head, grinning.

"What if I told you that she's not interested in me?"

"And how do you know that?"

Pete took another sip of his beer. "I warned her that people might talk, with her being young and single and living under my roof. She told me not to worry about it since I wasn't her type and that I'm older than the men she would normally date."

Zane snorted. "At twenty-four she's probably not sure what type of man is her type, and maybe it's time for her to date men your age to see what she's been missing. If I were you, I'd see that as a challenge and prove her wrong on both accounts."

"Why would I want to do something like that?"

The room was quiet for a moment and then Zane said, "You know what I think your real problem is, Pete?"

In a way, Pete was afraid to ask because the great know-it-all-about-women Zane Westmoreland was known to tell it like it was and not sugarcoat anything. "What?"

"Your problem is denial, plain and simple. You desire the woman, so admit it and stop trying to fight it."

Pete didn't say anything, then he said, "I have to fight it, Zane."

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want it. I’m not ready for it.”

Zane frowned. “I’m sure you’ve dated and desired women before, Pete.”

He nodded. “This is different.” He met Zane’s intense gaze for a long moment and only someone who knew him as well as Zane did would feel the depth of his turmoil.

“Ellen would want you to move on with your life, Pete.”

If another person told him that, Pete would be tempted to ram his fist into the nearest wall. “You don’t know that.”

“I do know it and I’m wondering why in the hell you don’t. Have you forgotten that Ellen used to be one of Megan’s best friends? She hung around our place just as often as you did. She was a wonderful girl who didn’t have a selfish bone in her body. There’s no way she wouldn’t want you to move on with your life. I think the problem is one you’re bringing on yourself.”

Zane took another sip of his beer and then added, “Apparently Myra Hollister is capable of making you want to move on and—”

“Hey, wait a minute. Things aren’t that serious. We’re talking about an attraction and nothing more.”

Zane shook his head. “But there *is* more, Pete. Attraction and desire aren’t the same. A man doesn’t desire every woman he’s attracted to.”

When Pete didn’t say anything, Zane said, “If you’re trying to stop desiring her, don’t bother.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t get rid of something you won’t acknowledge having. You have a thing for the woman, so admit it. You desire her, too, so admit that, as well. And if you don’t want either, then don’t hire her as your nanny because the more you’re around her, the more you’re going to desire her.”

Pete met Zane's gaze. "Too late. I have hired her." He paused a moment and then said, "I don't want chaos in my life, Zane."

Zane drew in a deep breath. "Any chaos will be of your own making. Desiring a woman is a healthy part of being a man, Pete. If you want to waste those emotions, go ahead. Doing so won't eliminate this problem you have but will only increase it. If she stays here and you try to fight your desire, then eventually you're going to snap."

Pete frowned. "I'm a lawman—I don't snap."

"You're a man first and you will snap." Zane stood. "I'm going to give you the same advice I gave myself a few years ago."

"What?"

"Stop trying to fight emotions you're supposed to be feeling. Sooner or later you're going to have to accept there's a reason Myra Hollister has the ability to make you feel things that other women can't."

Three

Myra slowed her car and took a deep breath when she came to the marker for the Golden Glade Ranch. She thought the same thing now that she'd thought when she came this way for her initial interview. Sheriff Pete Higgins's ranch was simply magnificent.

It sat on what she figured to be over two hundred acres of land. On one side of the ranch house were rows and rows of pear trees, which fared surprisingly well in Denver's cold weather. On the other side she saw herds of beautiful horses running in a gated area.

Inwardly, she asked herself—for the umpteenth time since putting the last piece of her luggage inside the car—if she was making the right move. Now it went beyond just her personal finances. She was dealing with her peace of mind. A part of her had hoped Wallace would call so she could tell him the change of plans. That she'd been hired as a nanny after all. Then she would tell him about her misgivings.

Knowing Wallace like she did, he would probably find it amusing that she had finally met someone who interested her...even though she felt the man *shouldn't* interest her. Not only was it bad timing, it was a bad situation all around.

It was days like this that she missed her parents more than ever because she would have talked to them, as well. They had never tried forcing her to date anyone. What made her happy had made them happy and she'd appreciated that.

This would be her first holiday season without them and instead of celebrating like she knew they'd want her to do even without them, she would be returning to Charleston to fight her brother for the company he was trying to take away from her.

As she continued down the long drive, her thoughts returned to her present predicament, which was being nanny to Ciara. It would only last two months, and chances were Pete would be gone most of the time. After all, he was the sheriff of Denver.

And when he was at home, they probably wouldn't see each other much.

If she really believed that, then why was she feeling like she was about to have an anxiety attack?

Finally, she brought her car to a stop in front of Pete's home and drew in a deep breath. She would take care of Ciara and then she would be gone. Why was she suddenly feeling like these would be the longest two months of her life?

* * *

Pete was convinced that when it came to women, they had a language all their own. And it was one they'd deliberately created so a man couldn't understand. He'd always thought that while hanging around the Westmoreland ladies. Now he was even more convinced, seeing how Bonnie and Myra interacted. He had a feeling that if Ciara was older, she would be right there, too.

Just like she'd said she would do, Myra had arrived at lunchtime. He'd been standing at the window staring out when he'd seen her car pull up. He wouldn't deny it; he'd been waiting for her. Mainly to help with any items she might need to get out of the car. At least that was the lame excuse he'd told himself. She hadn't needed help and the one piece of huge luggage had been easy for her to roll inside. He had looked forward to helping her get settled and showing her around, but Bonnie had appeared. She'd let him know she would be showing Myra around and that he wasn't needed.

He had escaped to the basement where his man cave was located, although now it mostly resembled a baby cave. Ciara's toys, along with her playpen and swing, took up a lot of the room. Derringer had recommended the swing. It was great on those days when a football game was on. All Pete had to do was wind it up every twenty minutes. And thanks to Flipper, one of Bane Westmoreland's Navy SEAL friends, who was a master diver and a tech wiz, Pete had a remote for Ciara's swing. He could rewind the swing without moving off the sofa. How sweet was that?

However, today Pete wanted to move around. Specifically, he wanted to go upstairs to the main floor to see what was going on. Footsteps were constantly grating across the ceiling and he figured Bonnie was showing Myra around. It was his house so shouldn't he be doing that?

He glanced over at Ciara in the swing. She looked like she didn't have a care in the world. She didn't. She wouldn't. Not even when she reached the age of twenty-one, thanks to the trust fund he and her grandparents had established from the proceeds of her parents' insurance policies.

She did look sleepy, though. Maybe he should take her upstairs and put her down for her nap. Pete rubbed a hand across his face. It was pathetic that he was looking for any excuse to leave the comfort of his man cave and go upstairs to see Myra Hollister.

If he didn't know any better, he'd think it was a deliberate ploy of Bonnie's, to keep him separated from Myra. Had Bonnie picked up on his attraction to Myra again today? Had she felt the heat while he watched Myra get out of her car wearing a pair of skinny jeans, knee boots and a dark gray pullover sweater? She'd looked good. Too good. If he hadn't been desperately in need of a nanny, he would have backed out of the arrangement. Too late. The plans were finalized. Myra would be in his home, under his roof, sleeping in the bedroom down the hall from his, starting tonight.

Over the next two months he would try like hell not to notice her. Other than being courteous when he saw her, he would pretend she didn't exist. Her goal was to take care of his niece. His was to bury his head in the sand and refuse to acknowledge he was attracted to her.

That he desired her.

There, he had admitted it. According to Zane, the first step in fighting your desire for a woman was admitting it. Until just now, Pete had refused to do so. But it had become clear to him when she'd gotten out of the car today.

How could he desire a woman this much? He wished he could blame it on something he ate or drank, or on his lack of

sleep. He knew it was none of those things.

When he heard footsteps coming down the stairs to the basement, he quickly straightened up on the sofa, rested his arms on his thighs and leaned toward the huge flat-screen television on his wall. He needed to present the impression that the football game had been holding his attention for the past hour and a half.

Glancing over at Ciara, he saw she was wide-awake and looking at him. If he didn't know better, he would have said she'd known what he'd been thinking a few moments ago. He was tempted to say, *Yeah, kid, your uncle wants your nanny, but she's off-limits and needs to stay that way, so don't worry—I got this.*

“Peterson?”

He cringed. Why was Bonnie calling him by his full name again? Heck, he hadn't done anything. She had no idea about the naughty thoughts that had crossed his mind. If she had, she would have reminded him Myra was there for Ciara and not for him.

He turned to the two women, giving them a look as if he was annoyed being interrupted. “Yes?” he said, standing to his feet.

Bonnie gave him the same kind of look his niece had given him just seconds ago. It was one of those I'm-onto-you looks. “I've shown Myra around and will leave you to cover the rest.”

The rest? What else is there? Instead of asking, he said, “All right. I can do that.”

“Great! I'll put Ciara down for her nap while you do.” Bonnie took Ciara out of the swing.

“I would hate to interrupt you watching the game,” Myra said.

He looked at her and wished he hadn't. Standing in the middle of his man cave she looked like that was where she belonged. That didn't make sense. They called it a man cave for a reason. Women didn't belong.

“No problem. My team is so far ahead I doubt the Gators can make a comeback.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned at him. “I guess that means you’re for the Buckeyes.”

“Yes, that’s what it means.”

“Too bad. I’m Florida all the way.”

He lifted a brow. A woman who liked football? “That’s too bad.”

“We’ll see.”

Bonnie chuckled. “I think the two of you need to take it outside, and while you’re out there, Pete, please show her around.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He watched Bonnie climb the stairs with a sleeping Ciara in her arms. He then turned back to Myra. “After you.”

He couldn’t help feasting his gaze on her curvy thighs and delectable-looking backside in her jeans as she climbed the stairs. Drawing in a deep breath, he gave himself a second to compose himself before he followed.

* * *

“All this land is yours?” Myra asked, glancing over at Pete.

He nodded. “Yes, every single acre we covered is mine. All two hundred of them. My great-grandfather bought it back in the early nineteen hundreds. He, Raphel Westmoreland and another man by the name of Titus Newsome all settled here together.”

Pete had given her a walking tour of the area around his house, which included a huge barn and several smaller houses. They had saddled up and were now on horseback, covering the outer areas. He told her he leased the majority of his property to others, preferring to spend his time on law enforcement.

“How close are you to the Westmoreland property?” she asked him when they brought the horses to a stop near a creek.

She looked at him and there was that smile again, the one that curved his lips while making her acutely aware of him as a man. He sat beside her on his horse, a huge chocolate-brown bronco he called Satin, and she knew why. His coat was so smooth and shiny it looked like satin. Although she'd assured Pete that she was a pretty good rider, he'd still given her a docile mare named Tally. She'd tried keeping her eyes off Pete during the ride, but he looked more cowboy than sheriff today, wearing a Stetson, sitting on the back of a horse.

“Do you see the roof of that house through the trees?”

She leaned forward and squinted. “Yes, I see it.”

“That was the Newsome property. In a way it still is since Dillon Westmoreland's youngest brother, Bane, married Crystal Newsome. The Westmoreland spread begins where the Newsome property ends. However, because of the shape of my property, there is Westmoreland land that backs up to my line in the north pasture. That's owned by Riley Westmoreland and he's built a monstrosity of a house there. The Westmorelands own so much land in this area that we call it Westmoreland Country. I'm just a neighbor.”

She heard what Pete said but knew he was more than just a neighbor. “I heard you're best friend to both Derringer and Riley Westmoreland.”

He chuckled. “Boy, how did I get so lucky?”

She smiled. “I've met most of the Westmorelands.”

“I understand you've been to one of their chow-downs.”

“Yes. I enjoyed myself. They were kind and there are so many of them.”

“Yes, they're a huge family. I'm close to all of them since we grew up together. I can recall clearly the day the cousins' parents died. I was hanging out with Derringer when he got the news.”

Myra could just imagine. She knew how hard it was to lose both parents, but to lose your parents and your aunt and uncle at the same time had to have been devastating for all of them.

They continued riding and he showed her a lake on his property. “This was originally called Magnolia Lake, but Derringer’s great-grandfather Raphael renamed it after the woman he loved, Gemma. Now it’s Gemma Lake and it runs through the properties owned by five neighbors.”

“Why did the landowners keep the name?”

“I’m told Raphael Westmoreland wasn’t the only one who loved Ms. Gemma. Everybody in these parts did. She had a big heart.”

“Thanks for giving me such a personalized tour.” Myra checked her watch. They’d been gone for almost two hours.

“You’re welcome. You’ll be here two months so it’s good that you know your way around. Even when I’m at work I’ll only be a phone call away. Ciara is my family. I want to do right by her and take care of her the way I know my brother would want.”

Myra nodded as they trotted their horses back toward the ranch. “You and your brother were close.”

“Yes. Extremely close. When our parents died, all we had left was each other. I was four years older than Matt, and he thought I was his hero. I tried not to let him down.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, then, “I understand you have an older brother.”

She wondered where he’d gotten that information. It wasn’t something she had mentioned to anyone in Denver. But then, she figured she didn’t have to mention it. Pete was the top cop in Denver. Regardless of Miss Bonnie’s recommendations, he would still check her out. She couldn’t blame him. She was thankful a routine background check wouldn’t tell him everything. It would definitely not reveal her deep, dark family secrets. She knew publicly Baron was trying hard to make it seem like their relationship was a close one. It was just the opposite. Definitely nothing like the one Pete had had with his brother.

“We’re okay,” she finally said. “He’s my father’s son from another marriage and because his mother was always bitter about my father divorcing her, she tried turning Baron against Dad.”

Why had she told him all that? She could have easily lied. Not wanting to think about Baron, but feeling the need to keep the conversation flowing between her and Pete, she said, “I understand Ciara’s grandparents found it difficult to keep her.”

“Yes, and after having her here with me for almost six months I can see why. They’re an older couple and Ciara can be a handful. Their intentions were good but I’m glad they decided to bring her to me.”

He didn’t say anything for a minute and then added, “Granted I wasn’t in the best position to take on a baby either, but thanks to friends and Bonnie, I made it work. I had a lot to learn. I am still learning. Ciara keeps me on my toes and you will see there is never a dull moment around her. It seems she learns something new every day.”

Myra could feel the love he had for his niece in his words. “I don’t want you to worry when you’re away. I will take good care of her.”

“And that’s all I ask.”

And she had no problem doing what he asked. She enjoyed Denver, and she was far from Baron’s ruthlessness.

He had teamed up with Charlene’s present lover, who had somehow convinced him that if he kept Myra away that he could run the company without interference from her. Thanks to her sister-in-law, Cleo, who’d overheard the two men talking, Myra knew of those plans. And she knew about how he’d planned to get Rick to help him keep Myra away.

Did Baron really think she would let Rick back into her life? Still, she didn’t need drama in her life. That was when Myra decided to leave without Baron knowing where she’d gone. Her plan was to return after her birthday when she could take over the company. With the help of friends, she’d faked a trip to Europe and that was where Baron was presently looking for

her. She was safe as long as he continued to be misled. She'd been careful about using a new phone and not using her credit cards.

“Ciara and I are dining with the Westmorelands later. It's chow-down Friday,” he said. “I would ask if you want to go but I'm sure you have a lot of unpacking to do.”

There was no need to tell him about Bella's invitation, which she had turned down for that very reason. Besides, Myra was certain the only reason he'd mentioned it was to be nice. “You're right, I need to unpack.”

Moments later, when they walked back inside the ranch house, they could smell Bonnie cooking dinner in the kitchen. “Did you forget to tell her that you and Ciara are going to the Westmorelands for dinner?”

He removed his Stetson to put it on the rack by the door. He looked at her with his eyes a charismatic shade of brown.

“I told her, but it wouldn't matter with Bonnie. Besides, you have to eat. Any leftovers go to the freezer for another day.”

A loud cheer made them look toward the kitchen to see Bonnie appear with Ciara in her arms. “Down BonBon,” Ciara said, trying to wiggle out of Bonnie's arms.

Bonnie placed her on the floor and the baby happily raced across the room to them. As if she couldn't decide which of the two she wanted, she grabbed hold of one of each of their legs. But it was Pete who she smiled up at. “Up, Da-da.” Laughing, he leaned down and picked up her, placing her atop his shoulders.

Myra had thought Pete's smile from earlier was mesmerizing but the one covering his face now was so captivating it nearly took her breath away. To breathe she had to look away. Glancing across the room, she looked at Bonnie, who seemed to be watching her and Pete with considerable interest.

Myra cleared her throat. “Do you need my help with anything, Miss Bonnie?”

Bonnie smiled. “No, I’m almost finished. Besides, now that your tour of the place is over you probably want to unpack.”

“Yes, I need to do that.”

“Before putting the food away, Bonnie, make sure you leave some out for Myra.”

Bonnie lifted a brow and shifted her gaze from Pete to Myra. “Aren’t you going with them to the Westmorelands?”

Myra shook her head. “No, I need to unpack and get settled. You’re still going back to your place tomorrow, right?”

Bonnie shook her head. “No, I plan on returning to my place tonight.”

“Tonight? I thought you were staying until tomorrow evening,” Pete said, and Myra could tell he was just as surprised as she was. When Miss Bonnie had given her the tour, she’d said she wouldn’t be returning to her place until late tomorrow.

“Yes, that had been my plan, but I got a call that one of my church members is sick. I want to check on her before I leave. Besides, I have no doubt in my mind that Myra is capable of handling things until I return.”

Myra appreciated the vote of confidence. “Thanks, Miss Bonnie.”

Myra glanced over at Pete at the same moment he looked at her. Their gazes collided and she felt a whoosh of air leave her lungs at the same time she heard him draw in a sharp breath.

Had she imagined it?

He quickly broke eye contact with her and asked Bonnie, “Do you know who won the game?”

Bonnie smiled. “Derringer did call to see if you were licking your wounds so I guess that means your team lost.”

“Yes!” Myra said, clapping her hands. “Go Gators!” She couldn’t help but laugh when Pete gave her a not-so-nice glare. “Sore loser, Sheriff Higgins?”

“You win some and you lose some. In the end, my team will win more than lose. I can’t say the same for your team.”

Myra fought back a grin. “We’ll see about that, won’t we?”

“Yes, we will.” And with Ciara still sitting on his shoulders, he moved toward the hall leading to his bedroom.

* * *

Pete placed Ciara in the playpen he had set up in his room. They spent a lot of time in here or in his man cave whenever Bonnie returned home and it was just the two of them. Because his bedroom was so spacious, the playpen didn’t take up much of the room, although it was plenty big enough for his niece to enjoy herself.

He shook his head, grinning as he recalled Myra’s reaction to hearing her team had won...and his had lost. Most women weren’t into football so having someone to watch the games with would be...

He paused in the process of unbuttoning his shirt. What in the world was he thinking? They would not be watching football games together. He could just imagine sitting beside her on the sofa, sharing a beer or iced tea. He shook his head. That wouldn’t be happening. He had to make sure their relationship remained as it should be. He was the employer and she was the employee. This house was her workplace and taking care of his niece was her job.

With that thought firmly planted in his head, he glanced over at his niece. She was playing with her blocks so he went into the bathroom to strip and shower. It had taken a lot of getting used to having Ciara here with him. He’d had to learn how to dress her, undress her, feed her, entertain her. Hell, he even sang to her before she went to sleep at night. He still thought the hardest thing he’d had to do was change her soiled diapers. It still was and he couldn’t wait until she was completely potty trained. He knew Bonnie had been working on that, and Ciara was catching on but wasn’t totally there yet. He hoped Bonnie had told Myra to continue the training during the time she would be away.

Myra.

As he stepped into the shower and moved beneath the spray of the water, he admitted she looked good sitting astride a horse. He figured she'd gone to riding school. That was pretty obvious by the graceful way she'd held the reins. Tally, the mare he'd selected for her to ride, had liked her. He could tell. Even Satin had liked her and usually his bad-tempered horse didn't like anyone. But Satin had let Myra touch him without trying to bite her fingers off. Amazing.

He would admit that at one point, when she'd picked up speed as if to get Tally to go faster, he'd panicked, hoping she wouldn't try to race the horse anywhere. All he could think about was Ellen. Granted, a human element had caused her accident. Nevertheless, the memories still managed to invade his mind, causing him concern.

Getting out of the shower, Pete dried off and slid into the clothes he'd taken out to wear to dinner at the Westmorelands. For years he'd had an open invitation to their chow-downs. However, he'd never made a habit of going because of work hours. And then, when the brothers and cousins began meeting women, falling in love and marrying, he preferred not to constantly be around a bunch of happily married people. Although he was happy for his friends, being around married couples only reminded him of what he would never have. What had been taken from him.

Because Ciara should be around kids sometimes, he'd tried to attend the dinners at least once a month. That way she could play with the Westmoreland babies. There was quite a number of them and nobody seemed to be slowing down. Derringer had told Pete the other day that he and Lucia were having another baby and Riley and his wife, Alpha, had announced baby news, as well. It would be their first. But the biggest news had come from the youngest member of the Westmorelands, Derringer's sister Bailey. She presently lived in Alaska with her husband. Bailey had called the family yesterday to let everyone know that she and her husband, Walker, would be having their first child in late spring.

Pete shook his head, finding it hard to believe that Bailey Westmoreland, former holy terror, was having a baby. Hell, he was still reeling at the thought that she'd settled down and married.

He glanced over at Ciara. She was still playing with her blocks. Then, as if she felt his presence, she glanced over at him and smiled. He smiled back and winked at her. She tried imitating what he'd done and instead she blinked both eyes, then laughed at herself. He couldn't help but throw his head back and laugh, too.

It had taken some getting used to, but he would readily admit that his niece had become the brightest part of his life.

Four

Myra closed the dresser drawer and glanced around. She had finally finished unpacking and had put all her things away. This bedroom was larger than the master suite of the house she'd been leasing the past few months. The huge window provided a stunning view of the mountains.

Another thing she liked about the room, in addition to its close proximity to Ciara's room, was the huge four-poster bed that reminded her of the one that had been in her parents' home. She sighed wearily. That was another thing she had to do when she returned to Charleston. Reclaim her parents' home. It was hers, but of course Baron felt he had every right to be there.

She had contacted her attorney, who had sent him a certified letter advising him that he needed to vacate the premises by the end of the year and that everything on the inventory sheet better be accounted for. She could just imagine what his reaction would be when he got the letter. Honestly, it wasn't her problem.

She glanced at the clock. A couple of hours had passed since Pete had left for the Westmorelands, taking Ciara with him. He had dressed his niece and bundled her up for the cold weather. He had knocked on Myra's bedroom door to let her know they were leaving. She had placed a kiss on the little girl's cheek and told her she would be there when they returned.

"And you're sure you don't want to go?" he'd asked her.

"Positive," had been her quick response. "I've still got a lot to do here." Truly, she didn't, but the last thing she wanted to do was ride in the same car with Pete Higgins anywhere. Being on a horse beside him had been bad enough.

"Then we'll see you when we get back," he'd said, before heading down the hall and out the door.

He hadn't said when that would be but she knew from attending one of those Westmoreland dinners that they could last for a long time, well into the night if the men decided on a poker game. She recalled Pete saying he would be working tomorrow so chances were, he wouldn't be participating in any card game. And she'd discovered that when it came to his niece, he was very considerate of her needs. He would probably want her sleeping in her own bed at a reasonable hour.

Leaving her bedroom, Myra walked down the hall stopping in front of a bulletin board. Bonnie had explained this board held the numbers of those to call in case of an emergency. There were also photos tacked to the board. One was a group photo. Bonnie had told her the photo had been taken the night Pete had taken custody of Ciara. She recognized members of the Westmorelands that she had met, and Bonnie had pointed out Bane's friends and their wives, as well as Westmorelands from Atlanta, Montana and Texas, and their newfound cousins, the Outlaws from Alaska.

Moving away from the wall, she continued down the long hall until she came to the living area. It made her feel good knowing there were some families, like Pete's and the Westmorelands, where family meant something. It was sad that her brother's greed was the driving force behind everything he did.

Myra had just sat down on the sofa and grabbed the remote when the front door opened. Pete entered the house with a sleeping Ciara in his arms. Myra stood. "You guys are back."

He nodded. "Ciara can't keep her eyes open past eight, which is fine since I need to get in bed, as well. I have to be to work at six."

She moved to take Ciara from him and was surprised when he drew back. "I've got her. On those days when I'm off, I like doing everything for her. I guess you can say it's our uncle and niece time."

"Oh, okay. Just call me if you need me."

“Sure thing.” He headed down the hall with a sleeping Ciara in his arms.

He didn’t call her and when some time passed, she figured he’d gone to bed himself. Then he reappeared, walking into the living room with his shirt out of his jeans and in his bare feet. She tried not to study his masculine build.

Before she could say anything, he said, “She woke up when I got her jammies on and got fussy. I ended up rocking her and singing her back to sleep.”

An image of Pete, in that rocking chair in Ciara’s room, touched Myra even more.

“What did you sing?” she asked, wanting to know.

He chuckled. “Well, it wasn’t your typical lullaby, that’s for certain. It was a Michael Jackson tune.”

“Which one?” When he told her, she asked, “Oh. What made you decide on that one?”

Was she imaging things or was his gaze focused on her mouth? Specifically, her lips. Or did she only think that because her gaze was focused on *his* lips?

He slid into the recliner chair across from the sofa. “Matt was a big Michael Jackson fan. I remember visiting him when Ciara was not even a month old. A part of me was proud of how well he’d perfected the role of daddy.”

He paused as if remembering that time. “Every night before putting her to bed, he’d rock her to sleep singing that MJ song. When I asked him why he’d selected that particular song, he said that because of his job in the army, there would be times when he would be gone away from her. Depending on the assignment, it could be for long stretches of time. That song was his way of letting her know that no matter where he went, or how long he’d be gone, she would never be alone because a part of him would always be with her.”

Myra fought back tears while imagining Pete’s brother conveying his love to his daughter that way. She could tell the memories touched Pete and she appreciated him sharing them with her.

The room was quiet before he said, “Whenever I sing that MJ song to Ciara, it’s as if she’s remembering Matt singing it to her. She settles down and quickly drifts off to sleep.”

Myra didn’t say anything. She couldn’t with the hard lump she felt in her throat. “I think that’s special, Pete,” she was finally able to say.

He raised a brow. “Do you?”

Why did he sound unconvinced? “Yes.”

“Why? Aren’t you the one who told me just the other day that Ciara won’t remember her parents?”

She heard the bitterness in his voice. “Yes, but that’s just visually. Auditory memory is another story. That’s why pregnant women often read to babies who’re in their wombs, talk to them, play music to them. Babies can relate to sound. I’m sorry if I gave you the impression Ciara wouldn’t remember anything about her parents.”

He stood. “No harm done.” Then, as if he wanted to not only change the subject, but also to end conversation between them completely, he said, “If I don’t have an unusually busy day tomorrow, I should be home by five.”

He was so tall that she had to tilt her head back to look at him. “Okay, Pete. Ciara and I will be here waiting.”

Too late she realized how that had sounded. “What I meant is that we—”

“I know what you meant, Myra. I’ll see you tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night, Pete.”

Myra watched him walk out of the room. She practically held her breath until she heard the door close behind him.

* * *

“Well, do you believe me now, Sheriff?”

Pete studied the image on the mini video recorder. It wasn’t the best quality, but it served the older woman’s purpose. For

months she'd claimed a ghost was trying to scare her out of her home. Of course, since there wasn't any such thing as ghosts, he'd figured the eighty-four-year-old woman was just seeing things. However, when she'd called today, he'd told his deputies he would go visit Ms. Katherine. The last thing he had expected was proof.

"How did you get this?" he asked.

"That boy who cuts my grass, Olson Thomas's teenage grandson. He set up the recorder for me." She gave him an I-told-you-so smile. "What do you say to that?"

Honestly, Pete didn't know what to say. But he was still certain that no matter what the video showed, there was no such thing as ghosts. "I'm going to need to keep this and have the lab analyze it. In the meantime, I need to take a look around."

"Certainly, Sheriff. And how is that pretty little niece of yours?"

He smiled at the older woman who he'd known all his life. "Ciara is doing fine. Thanks for asking."

"I understand Bonnie had to leave unexpectedly and you have a temporary nanny."

"Yes, that's right."

"Have you noticed just how pretty she is?"

Pete smiled. "I notice just how pretty my niece is every time I see her."

The older woman frowned. "I am not talking about your niece, Sheriff."

He held back a chuckle. "Then I can't imagine who's prettier than my niece."

"What about that woman staying with you?"

He met her gaze. "Oh. You mean my temporary nanny who's living with me to take care of Ciara?" he asked, feeling the need to establish the facts.

"Yes, that's the one."

He nodded. “You think she’s pretty?”

“Yes.”

He shrugged. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Thirty minutes later he left Ms. Katherine’s house even more baffled. When he’d seen the video, he’d figured it had been a couple of neighborhood teens. Everyone knew of her claim of seeing ghosts. Now, after walking around her backyard, he wasn’t 100 percent sold on that theory. He hadn’t seen a single footprint.

When he came to a stop sign, he recalled how Ms. Katherine had tried goading him about Myra. When he’d told Myra people would talk about them living under the same roof, Ms. Katherine had headed that list.

As he turned the corner to head back toward his office, he thought about his live-in nanny. It had been a little over three weeks since Myra had moved into his place and so far, so good. They had established a routine where he pretty much avoided her when he got home from work. He’d also put an end to his drop-in visits at home for lunch.

Myra would have dinner prepared, and he’d been surprised what a good cook she was. Granted she was into cooking healthy foods. Instead of frying chicken, she would bake it, and he was eating more salads and fewer starches. She also served herbal tea in place of sweet iced tea. He’d decided not to complain and now he’d gotten used to it. He left the table with his stomach full. After dinner he would get his niece and take her with him to the man cave. Evidently, Myra thought the basement was off-limits since she never ventured down there. Then around seven, he would return upstairs and give Ciara to Myra to get her ready for bed.

Later he would meet them in Ciara’s room where he would rock and sing his niece to sleep. Afterward, he would retire to his own room, shower and go to bed. He made it a point to get up and leave for work before Myra got up the next morning to avoid seeing her.

It did bother him, however, that Myra never sat down and ate dinner with them. When was she eating? Before he got home every day? When he and Ciara retired to the man cave after dinner? After he went to bed? Pete felt he had every right to be annoyed about the distance since Bonnie would share dinner with him and Ciara.

His only problem with their living arrangements so far were those nights when he went to bed but couldn't get to sleep. He would lie awake, staring up at the ceiling, hearing her movements beyond his closed bedroom door. He knew when she would wake up to check on Ciara, or when she needed a drink of water or milk at about three in the morning.

He would lie in bed and remember how she'd looked when he'd gotten home that night, recalling her outfit, regardless of whether it was a dress, skirt and blouse, or a pair of leggings with a pullover sweater. She had the figure for anything she put on her body. She could wear a potato sack and he would still give her a second look. And then there was her hair. Some days she had it pulled up and some days she wore it down. It didn't matter how she wore it, it looked good enough to run his hands through.

She didn't wear makeup when she was home. Honestly, she didn't need it since her skin appeared so smooth and soft without it. And she always wore a smile that seemed to come naturally. His attitude or disposition never seemed to faze her. It was as if she'd made up her mind that he was inconsequential. The reason she was there was to take care of Ciara and she could ignore the rest. Including him.

Especially him.

He was well aware that she went out of her way to avoid him as much as he was trying to avoid her. So far they were doing a pretty good job at it and he should be happy. But instead he had to fight down his desire whenever he saw her. That took a lot of work. More than he wanted to put up with.

Since he was off work most weekends, they had agreed those days would be Myra's days off. Because she had moved into his place, she didn't have a house to check on. Instead she

had spent the first two weekends with Leola Miller, an older woman who'd lived next door to her rental and whom she'd befriended.

Telling himself he was being considerate, he refused to go to bed on Sundays until he knew she was back, safely under his roof. Deep down he figured it was more than that. He would be sitting in the living room on the sofa and the moment she walked through the door an emotion he wasn't used to feeling would stir inside him. That first time, she'd been surprised to see him waiting up for her and had told him he didn't need to do that. He'd told her he did and without any further explanation, he'd gone to his bedroom. That second time, she'd known what to expect and had merely thanked him for caring for her safety. Her words of appreciation had broken the ice and before going off to bed he'd inquired about Ms. Miller's health. Although it had lasted less than five minutes, it had been the longest conversation they'd shared since she had moved in.

The Westmorelands had invited them for Thanksgiving dinner. She'd declined, saying she'd made plans that would include the entire weekend. She would be leaving early Thanksgiving morning and wouldn't return until Sunday afternoon.

A part of him had wondered what those plans were and with whom she had them, but because he had no right to ask, he hadn't. But that hadn't kept him from imagining things, like that guy named Wallace coming to town. The thought hadn't sat right with him, but what she did was her business.

* * *

Myra smiled when she opened the door to Bella Westmoreland. After a couple of days of snow over Thanksgiving, the sun was now peeking through the clouds. Although it was still cold outside, the temperature was a lot better than what it had been. Myra had enjoyed her girls' trip this past weekend to Breckenridge with Rekka. They hadn't spent time together in ages.

She had reached out to her college friend weeks ago after hearing about her recent breakup. She had been careful to pay only in cash, and Rekka had covered the hotel. Rekka was getting on with her life and seemed to be doing a good job of it. Myra was proud of her friend.

“Come in. I’m glad to see you,” Myra said to Bella, widening the door to let her in. “I just put Ciara down for her nap. Come sit by the fireplace.”

The one thing she and Bella had in common, being Southern girls, was getting used to the Colorado weather. At least Myra didn’t have to get used to it too much since she would be leaving to return to South Carolina next month.

“Thanks,” Bella said, peeling off her coat and handing it to Myra.

Myra had heard the story of how Bella had moved here to claim the inheritance her grandfather had left, ended up staying and meeting Jason. Myra thought Jason, and any of the male Westmorelands for that matter, was a good catch. Not only were they handsome, but they were also thoughtful and kind.

She had a feeling Pete would be a good catch, too. He was handsome, but the verdict was still out for thoughtful and kind. At least he exhibited those behaviors to his niece. Bottom line, he ignored Myra most of the time. But then, wasn’t she trying to ignore him, as well?

“Would you like a cup of tea?” Myra asked.

“I’d love a cup. Thanks.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Moments later Myra returned with two cups of tea on a serving tray she’d found in one of the cabinets.

“Thanks,” Bella said. She took a sip, smiled and said, “This is delicious.”

“Thanks. So what brings you out in the cold today?” Myra asked, taking a sip of her own tea.

Bella settled comfortably on the sofa. “Two reasons, actually. First, I wanted to see how you’re doing since it’s been over three weeks since you started here as nanny.”

Myra braced her back against the sofa’s cushions. She liked Bella and had from the first. There was a genuine kindness in Bella that was lacking in other people. Myra could see how Jason had fallen in love with her. “So far, so good. I’ve established a routine for Ciara, which is pretty much the same one Miss Bonnie had. She’s such a happy baby and a joy to keep.”

“That’s good news. I knew you would work out well. The girls just loved it whenever Pete would bring Ciara over for a visit. She is such a happy baby and I’m glad Pete’s putting her first.”

Myra nodded. “He definitely loves her, that’s for sure.”

Bella took another sip of her tea and then said, “The other reason I’m here is to tell you about the Westmoreland Foundation Charity Ball next month.”

“A charity ball?”

“Yes. The Westmoreland Foundation was established years ago to aid various community causes. The charity ball is one of the ways they do so. I was selected as this year’s chairperson. The ball holds special meaning for me since it was the first event I attended in Denver and the one where I met Jason.”

Myra was always moved by the sparkle she would see in Bella’s eyes whenever she mentioned her husband. It was love, through and through. Myra wondered if there was a man who’d put that same sparkle in her eyes one day. She doubted it. Besides, she had so much to do before the year ended and romance was not on the list.

“I’d love to attend but I’m not sure I’ll still be here. When is it?”

“This year it would be New Year’s Eve night.”

Disappointment settled in Myra. She would be gone by then. “Sorry, I won’t be here then.”

“Oh.” She could see Bella’s disappointment, as well. “I wish you could extend your visit. I would love for you to meet some of the other Westmorelands. They all fly in for the event.”

Myra wished she could but she couldn’t. When she arrived back in Charleston, she would officially be twenty-five and removing Baron and putting Wallace in charge was her priority. “I have business I need to take care of in Charleston during the days following Christmas, but if I finish it in time, I will try and come back.”

Bella beamed. “That would be great and I hope you truly will come back. There’s nothing like starting the New Year off right.”

Myra agreed. “Now I have a request to make of you.”

“Sure, what is it?” Bella asked, a smile curving her lips from corner to corner.

“I need to stay here in Denver through Christmas, and not leave until the day after. Miss Bonnie will be returning the week before Christmas and I’ll need to find somewhere to live for about week. Will you have any accommodations at your bed-and-breakfast inn?”

“I will definitely hold a place for you, but you’re welcome to move in with me and Jason.”

Myra shook her head. “I can’t possibly do that. A room at your inn would work for me. Just let me know how much it will be.”

“Nothing. I don’t charge for when the family, friends or business associates of the Westmorelands come visiting.”

“I have to pay you something.”

Bella shook her head. “No, you don’t and we won’t discuss it any further. Besides, I doubt you’ll be needing a room. There’s no way Pete will let you leave here without a place to stay. That’s just not Pete.”

Myra decided not to disillusion her, but it could very well be Pete. To him she was just a paid employee whose time ended

when Bonnie returned. He had no reason to care where she would be living after that. Deciding to change the subject, she asked about the twins.

“The girls are fine and of course they are excited with our news.”

Myra lifted a brow. “What news?”

An enthusiastic look shone on Bella’s face. “Jason and I are expecting another baby, or babies. Everyone thinks I’m nuts for even wanting twins again.”

“Congratulations!” Myra said, leaning in to give Bella a hug. “I am so happy for you.”

“Thanks. I’m surprised Pete didn’t mention it. We announced at the chow-down Friday night.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she and Pete didn’t have that kind of relationship. They barely talked. Other than asking her about Ciara’s day, he never said anything except casual comments about the weather.

“Well, I am happy for you.”

Bella smiled happily. “Thanks. Oh, I almost forgot. There’s another reason I stopped by. Pam’s acting school is hosting a Wild West festival. They are having a lot of games for the kids and even baby activities. It’s for all ages, including adults. Pam is even getting her sister, the one who’s a Hollywood actress, to fly in and participate. I think it would be great if you brought Ciara.”

Myra knew that Dillon’s wife, Pam, used to be a movie star and now she owned an acting school in town. From what she’d heard, Pam also held several social events at her school that benefited the community. The Wild West festival was one of them. “Sounds like fun. When is it?”

“Friday night. We’re canceling our regular chow-down, which means all the Westmorelands will be on hand to help. I’m sure Pete will be lending a hand, as well.”

If he had planned to do so, he definitely hadn’t mentioned it to her. But he truly didn’t have to since she was not privy to

his personal schedule.

Bella glanced at her watch. “I hate to rush off but I have a couple more stops to make. Thanks for the tea.”

“You’re welcome,” Myra said as she walked Bella to the door. “And thanks for your visit.”

Five

The moment Pete entered his home, Myra came into the room with Ciara walking beside her as she held her hand. When his niece saw him, she said, “Da-da,” before racing across the room as fast as her chubby little legs could carry her. He automatically bent to capture her in his arms. His little bundle of joy.

Had it only been six months ago that Ciara had come into his life, changing it forever? Honestly, he could barely remember what he’d done before her. When he came in from work, he would go down to his man cave, but he still did that. Now he had company. He also had home-cooked meals and didn’t have to eat dinner alone at McKays, the popular restaurant in town.

After hugging his niece and smelling the sweet apple scent of her hair, he looked over her head at Myra, who was watching them with a tender expression on her face. Why? He always greeted his niece each day with a hug. Usually Myra would appear from the kitchen carrying Ciara in her arms. On those days he would automatically take her from Myra, giving him the opportunity to smell the woman’s honeysuckle scent, as well.

“Hello, Myra,” he said, standing to his feet with Ciara in his arms.

“Pete. Are you ready for dinner?”

“Yes. What did you prepare today?” Not that it mattered. After skipping lunch, he was hungry enough to eat a horse.

“I made a meat loaf with green beans, squash, rice and yeast rolls.”

Pete nodded. It all sounded good. Why was she still standing across the room? He figured since he was holding Ciara, she had no reason to come closer. He intended to remedy that right now. Crossing the room to her, he handed Ciara back, intentionally leaning in to get a whiff of that

honeysuckle scent. “If you don’t mind holding her while I wash up?”

“Of course, I don’t mind.”

He moved away, then turned to her. “I prefer that you eat dinner with me and Ciara every day.”

She lifted a brow. “Why?”

“Because I want you to.” With that said, Pete moved toward his bedroom.

* * *

Because he wanted her to...

Myra watched him leave, not sure what to say. What if she didn’t want to? She hadn’t thought dining with him every evening was a requirement.

It didn’t matter that Bonnie had mentioned she would join him and Ciara for dinner and that it was time she used to bring him up-to-date about anything she felt he needed to know. Myra had been fine telling him everything when she handed Ciara over to him when he got home. They had established a routine. So why was he changing it?

Looking down at Ciara, she said softly, “There are days when I don’t understand your uncle, sweetie. If he wanted me to join you guys for dinner, then why didn’t he say so that first night?”

Not expecting Ciara to respond, she hugged her and headed for the kitchen. She had already set the table for one, so after placing Ciara in her high chair, she moved around the kitchen to put another place setting on the table. She could hear Ciara practicing some words she’d been teaching her. The little girl was a quick learner and the things she could comprehend always amazed Myra.

Myra knew the moment Pete entered the kitchen. Glancing over at him she saw he’d taken a shower. The top of his head still glistened with water. Ciara, who’d been busy with blocks, began clapping and said, “Da-da back.”

He went over to her, lightly pinched one of her cheeks and said, “Yes, Da-da is back.”

Myra looked away; otherwise she knew she’d get emotional. Whether Pete knew it or not, what he’d just said was monumental. He was acknowledging that his brother was gone and wouldn’t be returning. However, Matt had left him with this special gift and allowing her to call him Da-da was something he could deal with. He would tell Ciara the truth as she got older.

He sat down at the table and so did she, after putting a small plate of food in front of Ciara. Before Bonnie left, she’d told Myra that Ciara was ready to feed herself. Myra had continued to show her the proper way to use a spoon. Although the end result was somewhat messy, Ciara managed to put more in her mouth than on the floor.

They were in the kitchen’s eating nook instead of the huge dining room. Bonnie had told her Pete preferred the smaller area since it was normally just him and Ciara and Bonnie. After placing their food on the table it occurred to Myra just how small the area was. Just how cozy.

“Is anything wrong?” he asked, sitting down at the table.

She looked at him. “No. There’s nothing wrong.” She quickly finished what she was doing and sat down.

Before Pete could reach for anything, she said, “Just a minute, Pete.” Then, glancing at Ciara, she said, “Grace, Ciara.”

Ciara didn’t disappoint. She bowed her little head and said the recitation Myra had been teaching her to say all week. When she finished by saying the “Amen,” Ciara lifted her head, smiled and began clapping her hands.

Myra heard Pete chuckle. “Well, I’ll be,” he said in amazement, glancing over at her. “When did you teach her that?”

Myra was glad he was pleased. “This week. Today I decided to put it to the test. She did good, don’t you think?”

He nodded. “Yes, my girl did excellent. Thank you for teaching her that.”

“You’re welcome.”

They began eating in silence and then after a short while he asked her, “How did your day go today, Myra?”

She tried looking down at the food on her plate and not at his face. The last thing she needed was to get mesmerized by his eyes or turned on by his lips. Both had the ability to render her senseless when she dwelled on them for long.

“My day went fine. The usual.” After she said that it occurred to her that he probably didn’t know what “the usual” was. So, she said, “We got up around eight, ate breakfast, did our classes and—”

“What classes?”

She glanced up and the moment their gazes connected, she felt her muscles tighten as desire warmed her to the core. It was desire, she recognized it, although she wasn’t used to the reaction. But she knew what it was. It was there whenever she looked at him. There whenever she lay in her bed at night and thought about him.

At first the desire bothered her and she appreciated that when she woke up in the mornings, he was gone. Then she had all day to pull herself together by staying busy. Then when he walked through that door in the evenings and she looked at him, her torment would start all over. Heaven help her. What was there about Sheriff Peterson Higgins that got to her?

“Myra?”

She blinked upon realizing she’d been sitting there staring at him. He probably thought she was a nitwit. “Yes?”

“What classes are you teaching Ciara?”

She swallowed and broke eye contact with him to glance over at Ciara and smile. The little girl was doing better with the spoon today. “Her colors and shapes. And in addition to her saying grace, we learned another song this week, but we’re not ready to share that with you yet.”

He seemed amused and the husky-sounding chuckle caused a frisson of fire to rush up her spine. Eating dinner with him wasn't a good idea. Not when he was this close, sitting right there in front of her.

“Okay,” he said, smiling broadly. “I’ll take your word for it.”

His smile did it to her again and she nodded. She couldn't help a smile touching her own lips. “Bella stopped by today.”

“She did?”

“Yes. She wanted to tell me about the Westmoreland Charity Ball. She’s chairperson this year.”

“That’s what I heard, and I told Jason we better have something stronger to drink than tea,” he said, chuckling again.

Myra grinned, not sure how to take this side of him. This was the longest conversation they’d ever held and he seemed to be in such a good mood. “Tea isn’t the only drink Southerners drink, you know.”

“You could have fooled me,” he said, grinning as well, tilting his head to acknowledge her teacup and the tea in it.

She laughed as she took a sip. Moments later she said, “Bella also told me that she and Jason are having another baby.”

Another huge smile spread across Pete’s lips, making Myra’s heart skip a few beats. She still didn’t know how a man’s smile could affect her that way.

“Yes, and I’m happy for them. I remember the first time I met Bella. I was a deputy and got called out to her grandfather’s ranch on official duty. Someone had thrown a huge rock through her living room window with a note telling her to leave town.”

“Did you get the person who threw the rock into her house?”

“Yes, we got them.”

“Them?”

“Yes, it was two.”

She waited to see if he would fill her in on the rest and when he didn't, she decided to change the subject. It was then that she told him about the Wild West festival. He seemed interested.

“Not sure if I'll be able to attend since I might be working that night, but you should take Ciara. It sounds like a lot of fun.”

“I think I will.” Bonnie had mentioned that periodically Pete worked nights. Myra couldn't imagine having him home during the day and being underfoot.

She glanced up at him and caught him staring. “What? Is something wrong?”

He shook his head. “No, nothing is wrong.” He broke eye contact with her and began eating again.

Drawing in a deep breath, she then asked him the same question he'd asked her. “So, how was your day?”

* * *

Pete wasn't sure Myra eating dinner with him and Ciara had been a good idea after all. He could barely eat with her sitting right there. But then, that was why he'd suggested she eat with him. He had wanted her close. He was tired of her conveniently being absent during mealtime when he would sit and wonder where she was and what she was doing.

Although it was pure torture, he liked glancing up from his meal every so often to see her sitting there. She looked pretty today like always, and he hadn't realized until now just how much he liked the sound of her voice. He also liked sitting here sharing a meal with her. Holding conversation. That was when he remembered she'd asked how his day had gone.

“It was pretty busy. First off, I answered a call at Katherine Lattimore's house. She's in her eighties and a retired teacher here in town. She claims she gave up teaching after the likes of

Bailey and Bane Westmoreland.” He heard the sound of Myra’s soft chuckle and it seemed to caress his skin.

“I understand those two cousins used to be a handful while growing up.”

“Yes, and whatever you were told, believe it. Derringer, Riley and I were constantly covering up for them to keep them out of trouble. Bailey and Bane, along with the twins—Aiden and Adrian—were the terrible foursome.”

“So what was wrong with Ms. Lattimore?”

Pete found himself sharing Ms. Katherine’s ghost story and liked how Myra would tilt her head, listening attentively. “So, there you have it. She actually captured a ghost on video. Now it’s my job to find out what in the heck is going on.”

“How do you intend to do that?”

“Not sure yet,” he said. “And by the way, this food is delicious.” He truly meant it.

“Thanks.”

“Who taught you how to cook?”

She shrugged what he thought was a beautiful pair of shoulders. “In college I assisted at a homeless shelter’s soup kitchen for an entire year. Various chefs would volunteer their time and they often held cooking classes. It was fun.” Not only had she learned her way around the kitchen, she was also educated on how to eat healthy foods without sacrificing the delicious flavor.

He decided to ask the one question he’d pondered. “How did you become a Gators fan? Did you attend the University of Florida?”

She smiled and he swore he felt the brilliance of it spread to him. “No, I didn’t, but Wallace did.”

His hand tightened on his glass. He recalled the name on her Facebook page. He also recalled the man it belonged to.

“Wallace?”

“Yes, Wallace Blue. He works for my father’s company and attended the University of Florida. I went to a small all-girls university in Boston for college. My school didn’t have a football team so when I wanted to learn about football, Wallace was eager to teach me.”

I just bet he was, Pete thought and wondered where the anger toward a man he didn’t know came from. “Do the two of you still date?” A part of him regretted asking the question, but it was too late to take it back.

“Date?” She laughed. “Wallace and I have never dated. We’re good friends. He’s like another big brother to me.”

A part of Pete was glad to hear that.

“What about you, Pete?” she asked. “Why are you a Buckeyes fan? Did you go to Ohio State?”

Her question gave him pause and he stopped eating for a minute. Drawing in a deep breath he glanced over at her and said, “Yes, but just for a year. My dad died and I came home to attend college here. But I traveled back to Ohio whenever I could to see Ellen.”

“Ellen?”

He met Myra’s gaze across the table. “Yes, Ellen, my fiancée. When we graduated from high school, she and I left Denver to attend Ohio State together.”

He waited for the next question. The one that usually followed whenever people heard he’d once been engaged. People who didn’t know him well enough to know the full story of what had happened.

When she didn’t ask, he glanced up and saw her eating. “Aren’t you going to ask what happened?” He wasn’t sure why he’d prompted her. For all he knew she’d already heard the story. Bonnie might have told her.

She looked up at him. “Not unless you want to tell me.”

He thought about her response. In the past, people had asked him about it even when he hadn’t wanted to tell them. “Ellen was killed two weeks before our wedding day. She was

an excellent rider and participated in the Martin Luther King parade every year. That year someone tossed a firecracker near her horse's feet. The animal panicked and threw her."

"I am so sorry, Pete."

"Thanks. So am I."

Silence covered the table and he glanced over at Ciara. He'd just shared a part of his past, but Ciara was his future. Making sure she grew up happy was what he intended to do for the rest of his life.

He also knew something else. This was the first time he had mentioned Ellen's name to anyone without a feeling of deep pain in his heart, without bitter agony settling into his every pore. And without the need to look back and cling to those memories of her.

What could that mean? He needed time to himself to think through some things, possibly resolve issues within himself. Pushing his plate back, he said, "Dinner was great, Myra. Look, I need to go check on a few things and meet with my foreman so I might be a while."

"Okay."

He then left the kitchen, grabbing his Stetson off the rack on his way out the door.

* * *

Myra watched Pete leave and released a breath when she heard the sound of the door closing. She felt bad for him and regretted that she had reopened wounds for him. Bonnie had already told her how he'd lost his fiancée, so why had she wanted to hear it from him?

It had been heartbreaking. After twelve years he still hadn't gotten over her death.

She glanced over at Ciara and the mess she'd made. At least she hadn't gotten any food in her hair and hadn't thrown any off her plate. She had eaten every single bite. Myra got up

from the table. It was time to clean up the kitchen and then clean up Ciara.

She didn't have time to consider the feelings Pete's story raised.

A couple hours later she was done with both and yet Pete still hadn't returned. His truck was still parked outside, which meant he hadn't left the property, but he could very well have gone off on horseback after meeting with his foreman. Holding Ciara closer to her chest, she moved away from the window. The only thing they could do now was to wait for him to return.

* * *

It was getting dark and Pete knew it was time to head Satin back toward home. The ride had done him good since he'd needed to clear his head about a few things.

He had loved Ellen since he'd discovered what love was. They'd been so close and had known what they wanted out of their lives. He'd looked forward to their wedding day as much as she had because he'd seen it as the start of what would be the best days of their lives.

And then all his hopes and dreams, his future, had ended because of someone's cold-bloodedness. It had taken years to stop blaming himself, but there were times when his mind would play the "if only" game.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember their last days together. As time passed it was getting harder and harder to recapture the memories and that bothered him. Then he'd had that dream, the one where she'd come to him as if to free him. He hadn't liked it and he'd fought the meaning behind it.

Until Myra walked into his kitchen.

He hadn't expected the emotions he'd felt that day or since. He hadn't known he was capable of finding another woman as desirable as Ellen. Nor had he known he could dream of Myra while fighting to keep Ellen in his heart. He'd found the attempt exhausting. Did that mean it was time to move on?

What had Bonnie said? That he'd been breathing and not living? He could now say that she'd been right about that. He'd made love to women to release primitive urges and nothing more. However, being around the Westmorelands on Thanksgiving and seeing how happy they were with their spouses had made him wish for things that he had turned his back on. Things that deep down he knew Ellen would want him to have, even without her.

During dinner he and Myra had shared a real conversation over a meal. He had enjoyed talking to her, listening to what she had to say. Looking at her. Noticing how she was looking at him. He figured she had no idea what that look had done to him. How his blood had stirred each and every time he'd caught her staring.

He had desired her from the start, but according to her he wasn't her type. He was older than the men she normally dated.

Maybe Zane was right and he should take her words as a challenge, especially knowing how she'd been sneaking those looks at him. He smiled as he headed Satin back toward home.

Myra Hollister had no idea that things were about to get interesting in the Higgins household.

* * *

Myra glanced at the clock when she heard the sound of Pete returning. He'd been gone for nearly four hours. She had gotten Ciara ready for bed and rocked her to sleep, singing the song Pete usually sang.

Instead of going to bed herself she decided to wait up for him to apologize. It was her fault he'd had to talk about his fiancée. Needing to see him before he went to his bedroom, she walked out of the kitchen.

“Pete?”

He turned and she could tell he was surprised to see her. Even though it was still pretty early, usually after making sure

Ciara was tucked in for the night, she would escape to her bedroom and watch television until falling asleep.

“Yes?”

“I want to apologize.”

He lifted a brow. “Why? What did you do?”

She nervously licked her lip. “I made you talk about something that brought back painful memories for you.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for, Myra.”

“I feel like I do.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. Is Ciara asleep now?”

“Yes.”

She could tell from his expression that he regretted not being there to put his niece to bed. “You missed dessert,” she told him.

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“Peach cobbler.”

He nodded. “I love peach cobbler.”

“I used those peaches Bonnie told me about in the freezer.”

He nodded. “It’s not too late. I think I’ll have some cobbler now,” he said, walking toward her. When he got close, she moved out of his way so as not to block the entrance.

Instead of passing by, he stopped. He stood right in front of her, and the way the lamp shone on them, she could look deep into his eyes.

“I don’t bite, you know,” he said.

She wasn’t so sure about that. She could feel the essence of him in every pore, nerve and pulse. “Yes, I know you don’t.”

He was still looking at her, not having moved an inch. She was about to tell him good-night when he said, “Come eat

some cobbler with me.”

Not sure she'd heard him correctly, she said, “You want me to eat some cobbler with you?”

The corners of his mouth edged up, displaying that smile that did crazy things to her. “Yes. If you don't, I might end up eating the entire pan myself. I need you to stop me if I try doing such a thing.”

She couldn't hold back a grin. “You love peach cobbler that much?”

“Afraid so. Bonnie didn't warn you?”

“She did mention it was your favorite.”

“It's more than my favorite. It's one of those things you can become addicted to if you aren't careful.”

She doubted he knew that he was effectively pushing her buttons and making her wonder just what other things he could become addicted to if he wasn't careful. She was standing there imagining a lot of things and when his gaze dropped to her mouth, the hormones in her body seemed to burst to life. “That sounds like a big problem for you, Pete.”

“It is, so will you join me in the kitchen to make sure I don't overdo it?”

Myra nervously licked her lips. Things were getting pretty hot here in the living room and she didn't want to think what the temperature might be in the kitchen. Honestly, she should have the good sense to tell him that his eating habits weren't her concern, but that would be a lie. Hadn't she made sure all his meals were healthy ones?

Not that he looked out of shape or anything. If he looked any more in shape, she would go bonkers.

“Since you presented it that way, then I guess I will,” she said. Turning, she went to the kitchen, knowing he was following her.

Six

“That’s it, Peterson Higgins—no more. You’ve had three servings already,” Myra said, laughing, as she guarded the pan of peach cobbler on the counter. “I thought you were joking about eating the entire pan.”

He stood in front of her, grinning from ear to ear. “You should not have baked it so well. It’s delicious.”

“Thanks, but flattery won’t get you any more peach cobbler tonight. You’ve had your limit.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I could have you arrested, you know.”

Crossing her arms over her own chest, she tilted her chin and couldn’t stop grinning. “On what charge?”

The charge that immediately came to Pete’s mind was that she was so darn beautiful. Irresistible. But he figured that was something he could not say. He enjoyed this playful side of her and would admit to enjoying this spirited side of himself, as well.

It had started out with them sitting down and eating the cobbler and him commenting on how good it tasted. That got her to talking and she told him about those weekends she’d spent with Ms. Miller and that one of the things they did was watch old movies and how much she enjoyed it. He tried to remember the last time he’d watched a movie. A new one or an old one.

She snapped her fingers in front of his face to reclaim his attention. “If you have to think that hard about a charge, then that means there isn’t one.”

“Oh, there’s one, all right. How about harboring someone else’s property?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “How about it? Do you honestly think you can make that charge stick?”

“Oh, you’ll be surprised what all I can do, Myra.”

She tilted her head to the side as if to look at him better. “Do tell, Pete.”

Her words—those three little words—made a full-blown attack on his senses. He drew in a shaky breath, then touched her chin. She blinked, as if startled by his touch. “How about ‘do show,’ Myra?”

Pete watched the way the lump formed in her throat and detected her shift in breathing. He could even hear the pounding of her heart. Damn, she smelled good, and she looked good, too. Always did. He’d noticed the leggings and pullover sweater when he’d arrived home earlier. She looked comfortable and sexy as hell.

“I’m not sure what ‘do show’ means,” she said in a voice that was as shaky as his had been.

He tilted her chin up to gaze into her eyes, as well as to study the shape of her exquisite pair of lips. “Then let me demonstrate, Ms. Hollister,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers.

The moment he swept his tongue inside her mouth and tasted her, he was a goner. It took every ounce of strength he had to keep the kiss gentle when he wanted to devour her mouth with a hunger he felt all the way in his bones. A part of him wanted to take the kiss deeper, but then another part wanted to savor her taste. Honestly, either worked for him as long as she felt the passion between them.

He had wanted her from the moment he’d set eyes on her, but he’d fought the desire. He could no longer do that. He was a man known to forgo his own needs and desires, but tonight he couldn’t. Not when they were out of control. She might deny it, but he could tell from the way she was responding to him that need was driving her just as much as it was driving him.

He heard her moan and the sound sent even more heat spiraling through him. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her closer, loving the feel of her body pressed against him. It was as if she was melting into him. It had been a long time since he’d tasted this much passion in a woman. He

doubted she knew just how potent she was, just how she was driving him to the brink. It was as if he couldn't taste her enough, hold her close enough. He wanted to absorb her into his skin, his entire body, as their tongues tangled.

Knowing if he didn't stop kissing her now he would have her spread out on the counter, he ever so slowly broke off the kiss. But not before swiping another lick across her lips with his tongue. Whispering close to her ear, he said, "Peach cobbler isn't the only thing I could become addicted to, Myra."

Then, taking a step back, he dropped his hands to his sides and stared at her. She wore passion well. "Don't cook dinner tomorrow. I'm taking you and Ciara out."

"Oh."

He dragged in a deep breath, pulling the luscious scent of her through his nostrils. "I'll check on Ciara before going to bed."

"Okay. Good night."

"Good night, Myra." Pete turned to leave the kitchen and as hard as it was for him to do so, he didn't look back.

* * *

Myra somehow made it to a chair and sat down at the table before her legs gave out. She'd been kissed before, but never like this. Never with slow, seductive strokes. He'd taken her mouth in a way that seemed effortless yet unquestionably thorough. And she had accepted the stroking of his tongue with ease, as if she'd known it would spread through her bloodstream. And when he'd finally lifted his mouth from hers, she'd wanted to cry in protest.

Drawing in a ragged breath now, she heard the sound of Ciara's door closing and knew he had left his niece's room. Would he go on to his room like he'd said he would, or would he come back into the kitchen to give her another mind-drugging kiss? Did she want him to? She held her breath, wondering what move he would make, and released it when

she heard the sound of his bedroom door opening and then closing. He hadn't just kissed her; Pete had devoured her mouth in a way that still had her head spinning.

Standing, she got busy and covered the rest of the peach cobbler and put it in the refrigerator. She wanted to be in her bedroom with the door closed just in case Pete did decide to come back. He said he didn't bite, but he did a good job of licking and sucking.

And the kiss had gone on and on. It'd seemed neither of them had wanted it to end. She'd become enamored with his taste. He obviously knew what he was doing, and she'd merely followed his lead while his mouth and tongue coaxed hers into moaning.

Just thinking about it now was increasing the beat of her heart and had erotic awareness curling her stomach. Tonight, she had undergone a sexual revelation, instigated by a man she'd initially decided wasn't her type and was older than those she would normally date.

Date? Now, that was a laugh. When was the last time she'd gone out with anyone other than Wallace? And just like she'd told Pete, Wallace was more like a brother to her than Baron ever had been.

Moments later, after tidying up the kitchen, she headed down the hall to her bedroom. Once inside, she leaned against the closed door and touched her lips, still feeling a tingling sensation there.

She had to put Pete and that powerhouse of a kiss out of her mind and move forward on the resolve that it couldn't happen again. No matter how enjoyable it had been. She would get a good night's sleep and hopefully in the morning she would be able to think straight.

* * *

“So, how's that new nanny working out for you, Sheriff?”

Pete rubbed his eyes as he glanced up from the computer screen. He'd been rewatching the video Ms. Katherine had

given him. Although it was a long way from being 4K ultra HD, he could still detect a willowy feature that seemed to be floating around her backyard. He and his men had agreed there was definitely something there; they just didn't know what.

His gaze lit on the man standing in the doorway of his office. Pete and Detective Lewis Tomlin had grown up together in Denver. They had started the police academy at the same time, and then Lewis left to work as an FBI agent for a couple of years. "She's working out just fine, Lewis," he said, leaning back in his chair with the palms of his hands bracing against his neck. "She's doing a great job taking care of Ciara and she's a darn good cook. Thanks for asking."

He knew the questions should end there but wouldn't. Lewis's grandmother was one of Ms. Katherine's cronies, so Pete was sure he'd heard something. It didn't take long to find out what. "I heard she's pretty."

Yes, she was definitely that, Pete thought. She was pretty and tasted like heaven on earth. He'd had to force himself to get that kiss they'd shared out of his mind. He had gone to bed thinking of it, had dreamed sweet dreams reliving it, and had awakened that morning yearning for another.

"You heard right," he said, seeing no reason to lie about it.

"Heidi and I would like to meet her."

Pete frowned. "Why?"

"She's only with you temporarily, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, we hear she has a ton of experience taking care of kids. She might come in handy."

Pete lifted a brow. "You're looking for a nanny?"

Lewis chuckled. "No, but Heidi and I are planning to get away for a few days by ourselves and are looking for someone to keep the kids for us."

"When are you planning this trip for?" Pete asked him.

“The second week in January. We want to head up to Aspen for some skiing.”

“Sorry, but she won’t be around. She plans to leave sometime around the holidays to return south.”

“Well, if she changes her mind let me know.”

“I will.”

Lewis moved on and Pete thought about their conversation. Specifically, the part about Myra leaving. Why was the thought a downer? He shook his head, deciding not to dwell on that. What he wanted to do was think about that kiss some more, how easily their mouths had fit together.

He had left her a note on the kitchen table this morning with directions to McKays, deciding to give her a little break from being in the kitchen tonight. She deserved it. He’d taken Bonnie out to dinner with him and Ciara plenty of times. No big deal. But deep down he knew it was a big deal. At the end of her stay in Denver he wanted her to reach the conclusion that he was her type and not too old for her to date.

Then what?

He rubbed his hand down his face. He hadn’t thought that part through yet. At that moment his cell phone went off and he quickly clicked it on. “Sheriff Higgins.”

“Pete, this is Bane. Crystal said you called.”

“I did and thanks for getting back to me. I remember you mentioning a while back that Flipper had developed some sort of special high-tech video camera.”

“Yes, that’s right. You know Flipper—whenever you can keep him out of the water, he’s inventing some high-tech gadget or other.”

“If possible, I’d like to use it in a case I’m working on. I think it might be helpful.”

“Then you’re in luck. Flipper and Swan will be here this week. They’re coming to town with the baby. I’ll tell him to bring it when he comes.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Pete knew Flipper and his wife recently had a little girl. “And by the way, how’re Mac and Teri doing? And all your other SEAL teammates?”

Because Bane was so close to his teammates, namely Viper, Coop, Mac and Flipper, all the Westmoreland family and their friends had gotten to know the guys pretty well.

“The McRoy household is doing fine. I talked to Mac the other day and he said the twins are climbing all over the place and getting into anything that’s not nailed down. I told him to stop whining. He wanted sons and now he has two.”

Yes, now Mac had two sons and four daughters. “Well, I’m glad he got what he wanted and I heard the ranch they bought in Texas is pretty damn nice.”

He talked to Bane for a few minutes more and before ending the call, he asked about Bane’s family. Bane and Crystal were the parents of three-year-old triplets: two sons, Adam and Ace, and a daughter, Clarisse. Adam and Clarisse had been named after Bane’s parents.

Turning his attention back to the computer screen, Pete jotted down some notes but again his mind began wandering. He’d never allowed a woman to interfere with his work before. He would push thoughts of Myra to the back of his mind. It wouldn’t be easy, but he was determined.

* * *

“Welcome to McKays.”

Holding Ciara in her arms, Myra smiled up at the waitress. “Thanks. I’m meeting someone here. Sheriff Pete Higgins,” she said, glancing around the restaurant. This was her first time here, but she’d heard it was one of the most popular eating establishments in town.

“He’s already here and asked for a high chair for the baby. Please follow me.”

“Thanks.”

Myra was led to the back and around several couples dining. It seemed a number of them recognized Ciara and smiled to greet her by name. Myra figured Pete must have brought his niece here often for her to be so popular. When they rounded a corner, she saw Pete the moment he saw them. The minute their eyes connected she felt like she was burning from the inside out.

He stood and smiled and she could no longer ignore the deep attraction she had for him. She had awakened that morning giving herself a pep talk. Although she had enjoyed their kiss immensely last night, she knew it couldn't happen again. First of all, she was his employee and living under his roof. The last thing she wanted to indulge in was an affair with her boss. Okay, she would be honest with herself and say she would love to indulge in one, but it wouldn't be right. Besides, the man was older and not her type. But he could kiss the panties off a girl without much effort. And there he stood, looking as handsome as sin and with a body to die for.

“Da-da!”

Ciara stretched her hands out and he took her out of Myra's arms. Myra watched the little girl wrap her arms around his neck tight and kiss him on the cheek. It was obvious she'd missed him. This was the first time Ciara had seen her uncle since dinner yesterday. Myra could tell Pete had missed his niece, as well.

“Hello, Pete.”

“Myra. I hope you found this place without any problems.”

“I did,” she said, sliding into the seat at the booth. “I'm glad you wrote down those directions for the short cut. GPS would have probably had me in the middle of rush hour traffic.”

“Yes, it would have. How was your day?”

Myra could tell him she had spent a lot of the day thinking about the kiss and trying to convince herself it was one and done. She'd pretty much succeeded, too. But it was hard sitting across from him and staring at his lips and recalling what they'd done to hers last night.

“It was great. That song I taught Ciara at the beginning of the week, she has it down pat now. But please don’t ask her to sing it. She gets loud and stuck on what is obviously her favorite part. I don’t think you want to get her started in here.”

He laughed, placing Ciara in the high chair. “I’ll make sure I wait until we get home.”

Her breath wobbled at what he’d said. It was as if they were a couple and he was referring to his house as their home. She tried forcing the thought to the back of her mind, but his smile was mesmerizing her.

At that moment the waitress brought them their menus. Myra broke eye contact to look down at it. “What do you suggest?”

“I would say their meat loaf but yours even tops the one here.”

“Thanks, that’s a kind thing to say.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you.” He then said, “Since we’ve taken meat loaf off the list, I suggest their pork chops. For Ciara, I usually order the kids’ meal ravioli. She seems to like it.”

The waitress took their order and Myra glanced around, noticing how crowded the place was and the number of people staring at them. She glanced back at him and knew he noticed, as well. Before she could say anything, he said, “If you recall, I gave you fair warning.”

Yes, he had. Not that it mattered for her, but he was the town’s sheriff and happened to be single. People were probably curious as to what was going on in his life. Although Denver was a large city, certain parts were pretty close-knit and it seemed this area was one of those.

That was fine because at that moment the waitress returned with their food.

* * *

Pete smiled as Ciara entertained them during the meal. She hadn’t burst into any songs, but she was trying to tell him

about her shoes. He didn't quite understand what she was saying and Myra had to translate. That meant he got to look into her face without it being so obvious he was doing so.

He had been anxiously watching the entrance to the restaurant and remembered the exact moment she walked in with Ciara. It was something about seeing them together that filled him with a sense of contentment that both surprised and confused him. He had pushed the feeling aside to concentrate on Myra.

She was wearing a long flowing skirt with a pair of leather boots. Her wool sweater made the trendy outfit look sexy as hell. The way her curly hair flowed about her shoulders with this mussed-up look had lust zipping up his spine. He no longer felt guilty about wanting her and accepted that was how it would be. He could no more deny he found her desirable than he could deny his masculinity.

And whenever she smiled, he felt his breath wobble in his throat. He would love to one day take her dancing. He could imagine holding her close in his arms while burying his face in the hollow of her throat and drinking in her scent. One he was getting used to.

And just think, he had come close to not hiring her as Ciara's nanny. She'd been with them for weeks now and he couldn't help but appreciate how well she took care of Ciara and his household in Bonnie's absence. He also appreciated how she'd reminded him he was a man. A man who'd finally realized he hadn't been living but merely breathing, like Bonnie had claimed.

He hadn't counted on such a change in his life. He had thought he was satisfied with things staying the way they'd been for years. But every time he saw Myra, spent any time around her, he was well aware of what she did to him. A part of him felt he should be fighting it. After all, why get worked up over a woman who would be walking out of his life in a month? She would be leaving Denver and their paths might never cross again. There could never be a future with them and a part of him wasn't sure he wanted one with her or any woman. The only thing he wanted to concentrate on was the

here and now. And right now, he was fully aware of Myra Hollister in every pore of his body.

Another thing he was aware of was that seeing them together had drawn a lot of attention. McKays was one of the few eating places in town that was locally owned. The owner, Tony McKay, had been close friends with Pete, Derringer and Riley while growing up and had taken over the running of the restaurant when his old man passed away a few years back.

McKays was a place where locals came to eat and in some cases get wind of the latest gossip. A number of the people in here had known Pete his entire life. They had known his parents and Matt and had encouraged him to run for sheriff. They were also people who'd known Ellen and most, like Bonnie, had told him at one time or another that it was time to find someone and settle down, claiming Ellen would have wanted that for him. In the past, he'd harbored feelings of resentment, thinking they had no idea what Ellen would have wanted. But they'd known Ellen as long as they'd known him. They knew Ellen hadn't had a selfish bone in her body. She'd loved life, embraced it fully.

He could admit now that the Ellen they'd known, and the one he'd known, would have wanted him to move on and live again.

“Evening, Sheriff.”

Pete snapped out of his thoughts to stare at the man and woman standing beside his table. “Good evening, Mr. Karl and Mrs. Inez.”

He knew they expected him to introduce them to Myra. In fact, he was fairly certain that was the main reason they'd come over to his table. “Not sure if you've met Myra Hollister. Myra is helping me out with Ciara while Bonnie is away visiting her sister.”

They exchanged greetings with Myra. “The Fosters were good friends of my grandparents,” he told Myra.

“Yes, Thomas Higgins was captain of our football team back in the day,” Karl said about Pete's grandfather. “And I

was captain of the basketball team.”

“And I bet it was a very good basketball team,” Myra said, smiling, causing the old man to blush.

“Yes, we were pretty good. We won the state titles in both football and basketball our senior year.”

The older couple moved on, but their approach had somehow broken the ice, and other people trickled over to their table on their way out for an introduction to Myra, as well. Since they were not sitting by the exit door, there was no doubt in Pete’s mind that everyone was making a conscious effort to come by.

“This is certainly a friendly town. For such a large city, Denver still somehow presents itself with a small-town atmosphere,” Myra said, after what Pete hoped was the last person to interrupt their meal left.

“Only certain parts of the city,” he said, taking a sip of his coffee. “Where you really get the big-town feel is downtown and in the newer areas, where a lot of people don’t know each other and prefer it that way.”

They were about to order dessert when Pete detected someone else had approached their table. He glanced up and saw that Derringer, Zane, Riley and Canyon were out dining with their wives. Greetings were exchanged. No introductions were needed since Myra had met everyone at a Westmoreland chow-down a few weeks back.

Zane told Pete that his sister Gemma had called that day to say she and her husband, Callum, would be coming to town for Christmas after missing Thanksgiving. Riley then chimed in to add that several of their cousins living in Alaska, the Outlaws, would be joining them for Christmas, as well. As much as Pete liked the Westmorelands, he was glad when they’d finally moved on, dismissing the thought that he just wanted Myra’s attention for himself.

“You’re off work this weekend, right?”

Myra’s question reeled in his thoughts. “Yes.”

She nodded. "I'll be going back to Breckenridge this weekend."

Her statement gave him pause. "Joining your girlfriend there again?" he asked, in what he hoped was a casual tone. That night when they'd shared peach cobbler, she'd told him where she'd gone over the Thanksgiving holidays. Unknowingly, she had solved a mystery that had plagued him.

She shook her head. "No."

He thought that was all she planned to say, and then she added, "I planned to go there to get away."

Pete wondered if she was making a conscious effort to be gone the weekends he was off. Those first two weekends she'd spent with Ms. Miller, had that been intentional, as well? "Any reason you're going away for the entire weekend I'm off work?" he decided to ask.

She shrugged before saying, "Bonnie said when you had weekends off, she would use that time to return to her place to check on things. I don't have a place to go, but I want to give you and Ciara some alone time."

That was thoughtful of her but not necessary. "Ciara and I will have that even if you're there. Please don't leave to go somewhere on our account."

"You're sure? I don't want to intrude."

"You won't be." In fact, he wanted her there with him and Ciara. He would question the reason why later. Right now, he just wanted to enjoy her company and he had only another month left to do so.

At that moment the waitress returned with their dessert.

* * *

"Thanks again for dinner, Pete," Myra said, when he opened the door to his home. He'd wanted Ciara to ride with him back home and he had an extra baby car seat in the back of his sheriff's cruiser.

"Did Ciara take a nap today?" he asked.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Yes, why do you ask?”

He chuckled. “Because she was a lively one tonight. On the way home I made the mistake of telling her to sing that song you taught her and she kept it going until we got here.”

Myra couldn't help but chuckle. “You can't say I didn't warn you. But she is getting sleepy. Just look at her.”

They both did and although the little girl was fighting it, it was obvious she could barely keep her eyes open. “I'll get her ready for bed,” Myra said, reaching to take Ciara out of Pete's arms. Their bodies brushed and Myra felt her heart skip a beat.

Cuddling Ciara close, as if the little girl could serve as a barrier between her and Pete, she took a step back. “I'll let you know when you can come tuck her in.” Faking a yawn, she added, “I had a long day and after I get Ciara ready for you, I'm going straight to bed.”

“All right.”

Why was she feeling a little disappointed that Pete hadn't talked her out of going on to bed? What had she expected him to say? *Meet me in the kitchen later so I can devour your mouth again?* Maybe he regretted the kiss like she wanted to do. Only problem was, she couldn't.

“Is something wrong, Myra?”

Too late, she realized she'd been standing there staring at him. Namely at his mouth. That very sensuous mouth. He had a look in his eyes that almost made her moan. It was a good thing he wasn't privy to her thoughts. “No, nothing is wrong.” Holding Ciara tightly in her arms, she hurried on down the hall.

She had given Ciara her bath and had just finished getting her into her jammies when the bedroom door opened. She drew in a sharp breath. This was the first time Pete had ever come into the room while she was here. Usually, he would wait until he knew she'd finished and had gone to her own room. He stood in the doorway looking way too fine.

“You’re just in time. She’s all ready for you,” Myra said, trying to make it seem as if his unexpected appearance hadn’t rattled her.

“Good.”

He walked over to the dressing table and smiled down at his niece. Myra had wanted to braid Ciara’s hair tonight but the little girl had been too fussy to let her do so. Huge locks of curls covered her little head and she could barely keep her eyes open. But when she saw Pete, she smiled up at him and asked, “Want me sing, Da-da?”

He laughed and then quickly said, “No, Ciara, it’s my time to sing to you.”

Myra watched as he picked up Ciara and carried her over to the rocking chair and sat down. When he was settled in the chair with his niece cuddled in his arms, he glanced over at her. Their gazes collided and too late she noticed her breathing pattern had changed. She wondered if he’d noticed.

She backed up toward the door. “Ahh, I’ll leave the two of you alone now. Good night.” She quickly reached the door.

“Myra?”

She turned around. “Yes?”

“Please meet me in my man cave in half an hour.”

She swallowed while he held her gaze hostage. “Is there something we need to talk about?”

“No.”

She nervously licked her lips as she felt the heat from his eyes drift over her. Her body automatically responded to each lingering visual caress. “Then why do you need me to come down to your man cave?”

“I want to kiss you again.”

At least he was honest and now she needed to be, as well. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” No use lying and saying she didn’t want him to kiss her again, because she did. However, it still wasn’t a good idea.

“I don’t think so either but my mind isn’t being ruled by what’s a good idea or what’s not a good idea. It’s being ruled by the memory of your delicious taste.”

Before she could respond, although she really didn’t know what to say to that, Ciara reached up and took a hold of his chin to force him to look down at her. “Sing, Da-da.”

He smiled down at his niece and before he could look back at her, Myra had quickly left the room and closed the door behind her.

Seven

She isn't here.

Pete tried downplaying the pang of disappointment he felt in the pit of his stomach. Had he honestly thought she would be? He had hoped. There was no way he'd misread the chemistry between them tonight. Chemistry he was certain Myra had read, as well. But just because she read it didn't mean she intended to act on it.

He rubbed a hand down his face as frustration set in. Not toward her but toward himself. They'd only shared one kiss and one dinner date and he expected her to...what? Hell, he'd been thinking like a typical man when what he was dealing with wasn't a typical woman. He was finding that out while watching her interactions with Ciara. She was definitely a lot different from any other woman he'd dated over the years. Mainly the ones who understood their role in his life was just for pleasure, and he made sure his role in their lives was for the same purpose.

But what if Myra wasn't into taking on a casual lover?

Pete didn't want to think of that as a possibility, especially now that he was on board with the idea. Now that he'd accepted the fact that the attraction between them was way too strong. It had been hard sitting across from her and watching her eat their dessert of chocolate à la mode. Every time she licked her spoon was an erection waiting to happen.

A sound made him turn toward the stairs and his breath caught when he saw Myra standing there staring at him.

She had come after all.

* * *

Myra had questioned herself with every step she took down the stairs.

Peterson Higgins was way out of her league. He unsettled her. Made her wonder about things between a male and female

that she'd never thought about before. With her lack of experience, a part of her wished she was getting a PhD in sex education instead of child psychology. Then she would know how to deal with this. How to deal with him.

Drawing in a deep breath, she paused on the stair. That was when he turned and looked at her. The minute their gazes connected she knew he did more than unsettle her.

She'd never had a weakness when it came to a man before. She could stand her ground with any of them. Being a sister to Baron made such a thing possible as he befriended some of the worst men alive. Men who had no respect for women and thought their only purpose was pleasuring a man.

Yet here she was. She'd come to Pete even when she knew it was not in her best interest to do so.

Myra had enjoyed their kiss last night even as she told herself it couldn't happen again. Yet every time she looked at his mouth, she *wanted* it to happen again.

And again and again.

The look in his eyes was telling. So was the erection pressing against his zipper. She should turn and run as fast as her legs could carry her. But she didn't. Something phenomenal was taking place between them and they had yet to exchange a single word. It was so intense it scared her in one sense but fueled the fire within her in another.

She didn't fully understand what was happening but knew it was something she could no longer deny. She didn't want it or need it but wasn't sure how to stop it.

Her father had always told her never to cower. If there was a problem, then you dealt with it. Therefore, somehow and somehow, she was here to deal with the likes of Sheriff Peterson Higgins.

"You came."

The sound of his husky voice broke the silence, intruded on the strong sexual chemistry flowing between them. It did nothing to lessen the intensity. If anything, his voice heightened her awareness of him.

“Yes, I came.”

She watched the sudden flare of his eyes. It seemed as if her response had ignited something within him. The very thought had her nerves dancing, and her brain racing. Not being able to handle the sexual excitement curling her stomach any longer, she asked, “So what’s next?”

He smiled that slow, sensuous, make-your-panties-wet smile. “We talk first.”

She blinked. *Talk?* Had he actually said that? Who wanted to talk at a time like this?

Myra’s concentration was on him when he took slow, deliberate steps toward her. She hadn’t walked all the way down the stairs and now he was coming toward her and bringing all that heat with him. When he reached the stairs, he extended his hand up to her.

She knew she had two options. Refuse the hand he offered and leave, or take it and go where he led.

What did he have to say?

She already had an idea.

Little did he know, although she was innocent about some things, she knew just how a man’s mind worked.

Deciding at that moment which option she would choose, she took Pete’s hand.

* * *

Pete led Myra over to the sofa, fighting hard to stay in control of his senses and his body.

The moment their hands touched, his pulse had done a double kick in response. But he was determined that they have “the talk.” It was basically the same conversation he’d had with every woman since Ellen. However, Myra’s would be modified somewhat. How? He wasn’t sure yet. All he knew was that it would be different because she was different.

He sat down and placed her in his lap. Her sharp intake of breath signaled her surprise. Good, he had a lot more surprises in store for her.

Pete shifted her to face him at the same moment she nervously licked her lips. If she had any idea what that did to him, she would stop.

“What do you want to talk about, Pete? Although I think I know already.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. This is where you tell me all you want is sex, sex and more sex and that you’re going to make sure I enjoy it every time. However, what you don’t want is me getting confused about anything. You don’t want me to get sex mixed up with love. You want me to know that you don’t do long-term, just short-term, and that your heart is encased in unbreakable glass.”

He didn’t say anything because what she’d said was true. That was what he’d intended to say, or at least a version of it. Some other man had given her the this-is-how-it-will-be speech before and she fully expected him to give her the same spiel.

Why did he suddenly feel like a total bastard?

“That’s right, isn’t it, Pete? That’s what your talk will be about.”

He stared at her, feeling drawn in by the way she was looking at him, by her scent, by the very essence of everything that was her. He drew in a deep breath knowing there was no need to lie, although at that moment he hated admitting the truth. “Yes, my talk would be similar to what you just said.”

She nodded and somehow he could detect her disappointment. Had she expected more? Now that she knew she wasn’t getting *more*, would she be willing to settle?

“I’m not into casual sex so I’m going to have to think about it, Pete.”

A part of him was glad she wasn't going to rush into anything. He wanted her to be certain because once she gave her consent, he planned on taking her on one hell of a sensuous journey.

"I understand and I want you to think about it and not rush into your decision. However, I want to give you something to mull over while deciding."

"What?"

"This."

And then he captured her mouth with his.

* * *

Myra groaned. Pete's mouth devoured hers and she tried fighting the desire he was stoking within her. He was laying it on thick, to the fullest. This kiss was even more powerful than the one last night. Again she followed his lead. When he deepened the pressure, she moaned again. *This is what the girls at college would call one of those bone-melting kisses.*

Moments later, when he pulled his mouth away, all she could do was whisper his name. "Pete." She was convinced that she would be consumed with his taste for days.

Nibbling at her, he used his tongue to lick the corners of her mouth over and over again. "Say my name again," he whispered against her moist lips. "I want to hear you say it again."

"Pete." She didn't hesitate and the moment she said it, his tongue slipped back inside her mouth, claiming hers fully. She was tempted to tell him she'd made up her mind already. She wanted to move forward and didn't want any boundaries between them. She would deal with the consequences later.

Shivers rippled through her. If she were to tell him that now, without fully thinking things through, she would be embarking past a point of no return.

She wanted Pete. For her this was a first because she'd never truly wanted any man. She'd been curious about sex but

not curious enough to throw caution to the wind. What she was craving wasn't based on curiosity but on something else altogether.

She was being stripped of her senses with this man and so far all they'd done was share kisses. But then he wasn't just kissing her—he was expertly making love to her mouth.

Somehow she mustered up the strength to rebel against her body's desires. No matter how much she was enjoying being in his arms this way, kissing him, she had to hold on to her sanity and not throw away twenty-four years of self-control for one night of passion that would mean nothing to him.

She was the one to pull away and it was only then that she realized he had maneuvered his hands under her skirt and was softly stroking her inner thigh.

Suddenly, memories of a similar scenario with Rick shot through her mind and she scrambled off Pete's lap, nearly falling to the floor in the process.

“Whoa, you okay?” he asked, when he caught her before she hit the floor.

No, she wasn't okay. She needed to breathe in deep, but more than anything she had to get out of there. Now. He must have seen the anxiety in her features. He tightened his hold on her. “Myra? Are you okay?”

She saw the concerned look on his face and instead of answering, she nodded. Drawing in a deep breath she said, “I'm okay and you can release me now, Pete.”

The moment he did so, she took a step back. “I should not have come down here tonight. It was a mistake.”

Then, without saying anything else, she rushed up the stairs.

Eight

Pete stood at his kitchen window, drinking coffee while looking out at the expanse of his land. This was something he did every morning before leaving the ranch for work. One day Ciara would inherit Matt's share of this place and he was determined to keep things up and running for when that day came.

As he sipped his coffee, he thought about what had happened in his man cave last night. Myra had wanted him as much as he'd wanted her, he'd been sure of it. But when he'd touched her intimately, she'd bolted. Although she had denied anything was wrong, the look on her face had said otherwise. He'd been in law enforcement long enough to know when someone had had a flashback of something they didn't want to remember.

Had she once been the victim of sexual assault? Had some man tried touching her in the same place he had? The thought that what he'd done might have conjured up bad memories had hit him in the gut last night and he could still feel the pain.

That was the reason he was still here, an hour later than he normally would be. He knew Ciara would wake up around eight and that Myra would get up earlier than that to start breakfast. He intended to be here when she did. He wanted to apologize for taking liberties he should not have. Everything they'd done had been consensual. The last thing he wanted was to create a hostile work environment. He had never taken advantage of a woman and wouldn't do so now.

"You haven't left for work yet?"

He turned at the sound of Myra's voice and then wished he hadn't. It took everything within him to ignore the shivers rushing through him. No woman should look this beautiful so early in the morning. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a pullover pink sweater. That color made her look feminine as hell and just as sexy. Then there was the way her curly hair

hung loose around her shoulders. He doubted she was wearing any makeup and she looked simply radiant just the same.

Regaining control of the situation, he said, “No, I was waiting for you to wake up.”

She wrapped her arms around herself in a somewhat nervous stance. “Why?”

He wanted to cross the room and pull her into his arms. He wasn't sure how he could make up for last night, but he would try. “I didn't want to leave before apologizing, for touching you in a place that made you uncomfortable. That was not my intent, Myra.”

She didn't say anything. Instead she studied the floor for a minute. Then she raised her head and looked at him. “You didn't make me feel uncomfortable. Just the opposite, Pete. I liked you touching me there.”

Relief rushed through him. And something else. Confusion. He again fought the urge to pull her into his arms. “Then can you tell me what last night was about? Why you ran away?”

She began nibbling her lips and he knew she was pondering what to tell him, if anything. “It's not important. At least not anymore.”

He stared at her, wanting to accept what she was saying, but the cop in him knew there was more to it. However, if it was something she wanted to put behind her, she had that right.

“Okay,” he said, moving past her to pour his unfinished coffee in the sink and rinse out his cup. When he turned back around, he asked, “Did you decide if you're taking Ciara to that festival?”

“Yes, I'm taking her.”

He nodded. “I promised Pam I would help out after I got off.”

“Okay, then we will see you there.”

He nodded and headed for the door. Before grabbing his Stetson off the rack, he turned and walked back over to her and did what he'd wanted to do since first seeing her that

morning. He pulled her into his arms, waited one moment to see if she'd lean in or away and then kissed her. He needed this. He wanted this. Her taste empowered him. When he released her mouth, he stared at her swollen lips.

“Was that your way of telling me your proposition of an affair is still out there?” she asked, staring up at him with a pair of gorgeous hazel eyes. Whenever she looked at him that way, he felt like a man doing a balancing act right above a dangerous cliff. One wrong move and he could fall.

He touched her chin. “It’s my way of letting you know I am here if you ever need me.”

Pete turned and headed for the door. Pausing, he grabbed his Stetson off the rack and then he looked back at her and said, “Yes, I still want an affair with you, Myra.”

He then opened the door and left.

* * *

Myra touched her lips that were still tingling from Pete’s kiss. When she heard the sound of his truck leaving, she moved to the table and sat down. The man was way too nice for his own good. And way too sexy.

After she’d left him last night she’d had a lot to think about because she’d done the very thing she’d sworn she would not do, and that was to allow the likes of Rick Stovers to dominate her thoughts. He wasn’t worth it.

She would never forget how at twenty she’d drawn his attention, that of an older man, one twelve years older. He was a successful attorney and had seemed quite taken with her. She was in her last year of college and was home for the holidays. They’d met at a party and had immediately hit it off. He was a perfect gentleman and had wined and dined her, made her feel special.

And then one night, after plying her with a delicious dinner, he’d given her “the talk.” At first she’d thought she was ready. She’d been a twenty-year-old virgin and had wanted to experience for herself what the whispers were about. But “the

talk” from him had bothered her. Maybe because he had stated what he intended to do so matter-of-factly; it had given her pause.

They’d kissed and his hand had found its way under her dress. He began getting rough. It was then that she had pushed him away and told him she wanted to leave. He’d got mad and told her she wasn’t going anywhere. She owed him for the four weeks he’d wasted his time with her and he intended to have her with her brother’s blessings. That was when Rick had told her everything, including Baron’s suggestion that he seduce her. When she’d headed for the door, he had tried stopping her. The moment he put his hands on her, she put her self-defense training to good use. By the time she left his apartment he’d been on the floor, clutching his precious jewels and bawling like a baby.

She had gone straight to her brother’s home and confronted him. He hadn’t denied Rick’s allegations and even said he didn’t appreciate her making such a big deal about it. He’d further stated that Rick was a man and had needs and if she couldn’t give Rick what he wanted, then she needed to get out of the game.

That was when she’d made the decision to leave older men alone.

Until Pete.

All she’d felt with Pete had been tenderness. His touch had been so different from Rick’s. And so was the way he looked at her. After a good night’s sleep, even his proposition of an affair didn’t bother her. He wasn’t looking for forever and neither was she. He was obviously still in love with his fiancée and would remain single for the rest of his days.

And although she wasn’t interested in settling down now, a time would come when she would want to do so. She loved kids. At twenty-four she had plenty of time to find a man who wanted the same things she would want. Still, Pete’s proposition was something she was thinking about.

Myra smiled when she heard Ciara waking up singing the song she’d taught her. As she left the kitchen to head toward

Ciara's room, the kiss she'd shared with Pete still had her lips tingling and a part of her warned that if she wasn't careful, Pete could start her heart to tingling, as well.

* * *

Pete leaned back in his chair and gazed at the two men sitting across from his desk. Navy SEALs, Bane Westmoreland and his teammate David "Flipper" Holloway definitely looked the part even when out of uniform.

"I appreciate you letting me use this camera, Flipper. Now I'll capture some footage of my own to figure out who's trying to scare Katherine Lattimore."

"Any leads?" Bane asked, while sipping coffee.

"None. To be honest, we all thought the ghosts were in her head until she captured the images. It's obvious someone was in her backyard moving around dressed as a ghost. But when I went to check I couldn't find a single footprint."

"You know why," Bane said, grinning.

Pete frowned. "No, why?"

"Because ghosts don't have feet."

Pete shook his head. Having grown up with the Westmorelands, Pete was used to their penchant for humor when there was none. "You're turning into a comedian, aren't you? Maybe it's time for your commander to send you on another mission."

"Ignore Bane," Flipper said, rolling his eyes. "Seriously though, there has to be a reason for that, other than the wisecrack one Bane just gave. Mind if I take a look at the footage that lady captured, Pete?"

"Not at all."

It didn't take a minute for Pete to load the video into his computer and it took Flipper even less time to reach a conclusion. "That's not a real body moving around in her backyard."

Bane joined the two men at the computer. “Flip’s right.”

Pete frowned and studied the image. It looked pretty damn real to him. “But how?”

“It’s fake,” Flipper explained. “Made with a high-powered camera similar to what filmmakers use on set. It’s so advanced you can basically code in that lady’s address, and any sort of image you want will pop up on the property via satellite.”

Pete ran a hand down his face. “Then that image could be coming from anywhere.”

“Yes,” Bane agreed, “but in order for the satellite to pinpoint the target, there has to be a digital receiver somewhere in Ms. Katherine’s backyard. It’s probably so tiny you either can’t see it or it resembles something you wouldn’t detect even if you saw it.”

“But I bet the two of you probably could.”

Flipper chuckled. “Of course. We’re SEALs.”

Yes, and Pete couldn’t help appreciating that such competent men were protecting this country. “Who would go to the trouble of doing this?” he asked, thinking aloud.

Bane nodded. “An even bigger question is why. Ms. Katherine has lived in that house for years.”

“It’s not the same house that you and Bailey spray painted orange,” Pete said.

Flipper glanced over at Bane. “You and Bailey spray painted some old lady’s house?”

Bane shrugged. “One of my childhood pranks.”

“Why?” Flipper wanted to know.

Bane smiled. “She was my teacher and wanted to promote me to the next grade. I wanted to hang back another year.”

Pete contained his laughter when he saw how Flipper was staring at Bane. “Why would you want to be held back in school?” Flipper asked.

“So I could be in the same grade as Bailey.”

Pete chuckled. “Now you see what the city of Denver had to put up with? Bane and Bailey, along with the twins, were holy terrors.”

“We learned our lesson, trust me,” Bane said. “Dillon made us repaint her entire house and not just the part we’d messed up. Ms. Katherine benefited when she got her entire house repainted.” He glanced over at Pete. “So where is she living now?”

“In the house her fourth husband left her.”

“The lady’s been married four times?” Flipper asked.

“Yes.” Pete then glanced over at Bane. “I think she got married again after you left for the military, Bane. She was only married to the guy a few years before he passed away.”

“Well, it’s my guess that someone is trying to scare her out of that house for a reason, Pete,” Flipper said. “And whatever the reason is, they feel it’s worth the money. Those kinds of illusions aren’t cheap.”

Later that day Pete pulled up into the acting school’s parking lot an hour later than he’d originally planned. Getting out of his truck, he glanced around. The place was packed, and he knew why. One of Pam’s sisters, Paige Novak, had followed Pam’s footsteps and pursued an acting career in Hollywood. It seemed she was making a name for herself. No doubt a lot of the people attending tonight were autograph seekers.

He got pulled into several conversations when he was seen by other people. That was fine because the closer he got to the door, the more his stomach became tied in knots knowing he would be seeing Myra.

He finally reached the door and a group of smiling men stepped out, grinning from ear to ear. He overheard their conversations and they were all muttering about how beautiful Paige Novak was. He thought so, too, but it was his opinion that Myra was even more of a stunner. There was something about the woman that got to him.

“Want a soda pop, Sheriff? It’s two dollars.”

He glanced down at the young woman. It was Pam's other sister, the youngest, who was working on her PhD at Harvard. "Don't mind if I do, Nadia," he said, fishing a couple of dollars out of the back pocket of his jeans. "I see Pam has you working."

Nadia laughed. "She has everybody working. Even Jillian flew home. She's in a booth dressed as a cowgirl and working the cotton candy machine"

Moments later Pete entered the foyer and could hear sounds coming from other parts of the building. He headed toward the auditorium, passing a number of people who tried getting him to stop and engage in conversation. However, he spoke and kept walking because at the moment he was on a mission to see two certain females. One had already stamped her name all over his heart and the other could...

He paused a moment to draw in a deep breath.

This was the first time since losing Ellen that the thought of another woman getting close to him, especially to his heart, had ever crossed his mind. He couldn't help but wonder what that could possibly mean.

* * *

"How do you enjoy living with the sheriff and being nanny to his niece?"

Myra was convinced that if another person asked her that question, she would scream. So far, this was the sixth time. Pete had been right about some people worrying there was more going on under his roof than met the eye. Regardless of whether or not they were wrong in their assumptions, the bottom line was that she and Pete were adults who could do as they pleased.

"I enjoy taking care of Ciara," was her constant reply. She refused to address whether or not she enjoyed living with the sheriff.

"Evening, Ms. Coffey and Ms. Finley. If you don't mind, I need to borrow Myra for a minute," Lucia Westmoreland said,

appearing seemingly out of nowhere, and looping her arm with Myra's.

"Of course we don't mind," the ladies chimed simultaneously and then she was whisked off with Lucia, pushing Ciara in her stroller.

She gave Lucia an appreciative smile. "How did you know I needed rescuing?" Myra asked when they were out of earshot of the two women.

"Trust me, those two are the nosiest on this side of town."

Myra nodded. "Pete tried to warn me that if I took the job of nanny and moved in with him there would be talk, but I didn't believe him."

Lucia lifted a brow. "Why didn't you?"

"Well, mainly because this is Denver and I figured this town was more progressive than that."

"It is, for the most part, but like any place else there are those who thrive on gossip. Besides, for years Elnora Finley thought she had a vested interest in Pete. She was convinced Pete would make her daughter Rose a perfect second husband."

"Oh. Whatever happened to the woman's first husband?"

"He was killed in a motorcycle accident a few years back. Elnora felt since both Rose and Pete had lost the people they loved, they would be the perfect match."

Interesting. "Did Pete and Rose ever date?" She hated asking but a part of her wanted to know. Needed to know.

"Not that I know of. In fact, Pete had to pretty much tell Rose and Elnora to back off because he wasn't interested. For years after losing his fiancée he didn't date at all. And he rarely dates now."

Yet here Myra was, contemplating giving in to his proposition. Drawing in a deep breath, she knew it was time to make some decisions. Pete had brought out desires within her that she'd never dealt with before. To deny him would mean denying herself. She no longer wanted to do that.

“Well, look who just walked in.”

Myra followed Lucia’s gaze across the crowded room and her eyes connected with Pete’s. His mouth edged up in a smile and she knew at that moment Peterson Higgins had gotten to her in a big way.

“Um, my magazine is doing a segment on law and order. I wonder if Pete would agree to be on the cover, posing as a sexy Western lawman. I bet it would definitely increase sales.”

Myra knew Lucia was editor-in-chief of a national women’s magazine, *Simply Irresistible*. With her gaze still locked with Pete’s, Myra said, “Yes, I bet so, too.”

* * *

Pete felt the force of meeting Myra’s gaze like a jolt of sexual energy. Never had any woman consumed so much of his concentration, his thoughts and his desires. That included Ellen. When Ellen had died, she’d been the same age Myra was now. Twenty-four. Now, as a nearly thirty-seven-year-old man, he was facing an entirely different set of emotions. He was dealing with a degree of lust he hadn’t had at twenty-four.

She looked gorgeous, standing there beside Lucia dressed in a long flowing cowgirl skirt, Western blouse and cowhide boots. Her hair flowed around her shoulders beneath a cowgirl hat. At that moment he wished he could cross the room and kiss her, regardless of the crowd of people here.

“I hope you’re staring at your nanny and not my wife, Pete.”

He didn’t even break eye contact with Myra when he responded to the person who’d come to stand beside him. “I have two eyes and can check out both of them.”

Derringer Westmoreland laughed. “You’re crazy, man.”

“You think so.”

“At least you better be because if for one minute I thought you were honestly checking out Lucia, I would have to end your life.”

It was only when Myra's attention was drawn to a woman who'd approached her and Lucia that Pete looked over at Derringer. "Need I remind you of what could happen when you threaten a man of the law," he said, opening his bottle of pop to take a swig. He felt hot and needed a drink, even if the contents weren't as strong as he'd like.

Derringer chuckled. "That badge won't matter any to me. Besides, it won't be the first time you and I have battled it out."

Pete smiled, remembering that time in fifth grade. "Oh, yeah, and then when we got home, your momma gave us another ass-whipping."

"Only because Zane told on us. What we should do is go find him and beat the crap out of him. I don't care if it was close to thirty years ago. We can even get Riley to help us since he was the victim of Zane's snitching a few times, as well."

Pete glanced back over to where Myra stood, still talking. "Let's do it another night," Pete said. "I need to go rescue Myra from Ida."

"Okay, but just so you know, now you have me wondering about something."

Pete lifted a brow. "What?"

"Who's going to rescue Myra from you?"

Instead of addressing Derringer's comment, Pete moved across the room toward Myra.

* * *

Although the woman standing in front of her was steadily chatting, Myra was aware of Pete crossing the room toward her. His heat called out to her, encompassed her. She thought about what Lucia had said about him being on the cover of a magazine. She could envision him dressed as he was now, in jeans, a Western shirt, Stetson and boots. The rugged cowboy type had never appealed to her before. Now, thanks to Pete, it did.

“Evening, ladies.”

Before either Myra or the woman could return the greeting, Ciara let out a huge “Da-da.” Myra watched the grin spread across Pete’s face when he leaned down to take his niece out of the stroller. Once she was in his arms, Ciara planted a huge kiss on her uncle’s cheek, nearly knocking his Stetson off in the process.

“My hat, too, Da-da,” she then said, pointing to the miniature cowgirl hat on her head.

“I see. It’s pretty.”

“Me pretty, too.”

Pete laughed. “You certainly are.”

“Evening, Sheriff,” Ms. Ida said. “I was just telling your nanny that if she needed more work after Bonnie comes back that I know a family on the other side of town who could use her services.”

Had the woman said that? Myra wondered. She couldn’t recall anything they’d discussed since becoming aware of Pete’s approach. “I appreciate you looking out for me, Ms. Ida, but I’ll be returning to Charleston not long after Miss Bonnie returns.”

The woman looked disappointed. “Oh, how sad.”

Myra wondered what would be sad about her leaving Denver. Before she could ponder that any further, Pete said, “If you don’t mind, Ms. Ida, I need to borrow Myra for a moment.” He took her arm and steered her off.

“Oh, of course.”

Myra didn’t say anything as she walked beside Pete, who carried Ciara. There was no need to tell him he could place Ciara back in her stroller since it was apparent he wanted to carry her around.

“I thought I’d better save you from Ida. She’s known to be long-winded.”

“She seems to be a nice lady.”

“Yes, she is. Just talkative.”

They didn't say anything for a while, satisfied to let Ciara take center stage as she sat atop Pete's shoulders, pointing out a number of things that caught her attention. “She's alert—that's good.”

Myra chuckled. “She won't be for long. She missed her nap today.”

“Have you guys eaten yet?” he asked her.

“Yes, we got here early and Pam fed all the helpers before the door opened.”

He lifted a brow. “You're a helper?”

“I was. Ciara and I volunteered to take the first hour of face painting.”

Pete grinned. “Let's be honest. You did the face painting and Ciara watched.”

“She was my little helper. And by the way, I like your look.”

He raised a brow. He had nice brows and his lashes were nice, as well. “And what look is that?”

“One of a notorious cowboy.” He hadn't left home dressed that way this morning so he must have changed clothes at the office.

He chuckled. “A notorious cowboy? Evidently, you missed seeing this,” he said, pointing to his badge. “This makes me a lawman.”

As they continued to walk around, stopping at various booths, Myra was not only aware of the man by her side but that several people were staring at them...like they'd done that night at McKays. Pete was a very observant man and she figured he was noticing, as well. “I could kiss you and really give them something to talk about,” he whispered close to her ear.

She jerked her gaze up at him and saw the devilish twinkle in his eyes. He was joking, right? “I wouldn't suggest you do that,” she said, biting back a smile. “How was your day?” she

asked, switching their conversation to a safer topic. The last thing she needed was for the thought of them kissing to dominate her mind. It didn't take much to recall last night when she'd sat in his lap while he'd kissed her into sweet oblivion.

"Busy but hopefully productive. I think we might have a break in the case of Ms. Katherine's ghost."

"Really? How?" she asked him.

They continued walking while he told her. "There's something else I did a lot of today," he said while placing Ciara back into her stroller.

"Oh, what?" Myra asked him. She studied the broadness of his back as he bent down to the stroller. He had nice shoulders bulging beneath his Western shirt. Why were her palms suddenly aching to rub over them?

When he straightened, he glanced over at her. "I thought about you a lot today, and do you know what I mostly thought about?"

She wished she had the strength not to ask, but she was powerless while staring into the darkness of his eyes. "No, what did you mostly think about?"

"How it would feel making love to you."

She started them walking again, mainly to keep herself from shivering all over. She was glad they were in a somewhat secluded section of the auditorium. No one had heard what he'd said, she was sure of it. But she had heard him, loud and clear, and his words had glided over her body like molten liquid. It was as if she could feel his body's heat and his body's lust. At that moment breathing became difficult.

She knew what all this meant. It was time for her to walk on the sensuous side and be the passionate woman she believed she could be. But only with this man.

Glancing around to make sure they were still pretty much alone, she leaned in close to him and said, "Then maybe it's time for you to find out how it feels, Pete."

Nine

Pete drove home following close behind Myra's vehicle, while images of kissing her again and making love to her all through the night aroused him in ways he'd never been aroused before. It had been hard to remain at the school and work the booth Pam had talked him into doing, handing out fake badges and telling kids about the importance of obeying laws. As soon as his time was up, he'd found Myra and Ciara and escorted them toward the parking lot so they could leave.

He doubted she had a clue what her words had done to him, but she would soon find out. What she'd said had pushed him to the edge. Yet he was determined not to pounce on her the moment they reached his ranch. Besides, she needed to get Ciara ready for bed and he would sing his niece to sleep. After all that, the night would belong to him and Myra.

He released a sigh when they reached the marker to his land. When had the drive from the acting school to his place become never ending? He slowed his pace, giving Myra time to maneuver her car along the long, winding driveway. His heart began pounding the closer he got to the house and when she parked her car, he pulled in beside her.

He got out of his truck and approached her car to open the back passenger door and take a sleeping Ciara from the car seat. Holding tight to his niece he wordlessly followed Myra up the walkway to the front door. After unlocking the door, she stepped aside when he carried Ciara to her room. Myra followed and after placing his niece on the dressing table, he stepped back.

"I'll be in the kitchen," he whispered, then left them alone. They might have eaten earlier, but he hadn't and he was hungry. Luckily for him, Pam had prepared him a to-go plate of ribs, corn on the cob, baked beans and coleslaw. He just needed to go back out to the truck to get it.

He had just finished the meal when the sound of Myra's voice came over the intercom. "Ciara is ready for bed now."

When he arrived in his niece's room it was to find her standing in the crib, barely able to keep her eyes open. She was getting older and it would soon be time to put her in a kiddy bed. He wasn't ready for the change and a part of him wished she could stay a baby forever. A baby who would always wait for her uncle to tuck her in and sing her a lullaby.

Closing the door behind him he noticed Myra had left. Was she somewhere having second thoughts about them sharing a bed tonight? Pete hoped not. He'd barely handled the buildup and couldn't imagine dealing with a letdown.

Taking Ciara into his arms, he moved to the rocker, and for the next few minutes he sang her to sleep, enjoying this time, their time, together. He had placed her in her bed when he noticed the note that had been slid under the door. A part of him was almost too nervous about what it might say to pick it up, but he picked it up anyway. Was it a note from Myra calling off their plans for tonight?

Drawing in a deep breath, he opened the sheet of paper and read the words.

Mr. Lawman, please meet me in the man cave. Myra.

* * *

Myra glanced around the room. She'd had to work fast to arrange things in here just right. While going through the pantry the other day she had found a box of candles, probably meant to be used in case of a power outage. However, tonight she intended to put them to a different use.

She'd grabbed a blanket off her bed to place in front of the fireplace, where a bottle of wine sat, along with two wineglasses. She'd even grabbed several pillows off the sofa upstairs.

The lights were dimmed and soft country music played—the theme of Pam's Wild West festival. Myra's goal was for them to continue in that vein and have their own Wild West night. She'd never done anything like this before; never deliberately set out to seduce a man. She should be the last person on earth to entertain thoughts of seducing a man—an

older one at that—after what she'd gone through with Rick. But at least she had enough sense to know Pete wasn't anything like Rick. Both were older, good-looking men, but when it came to class, Rick had somehow missed the boat. Whatever foolishness some women had told him over the years had gone to his head and stayed there.

With Rick it had been about conquering. But Myra believed with Pete it would be about pleasuring. The two men were as different as night and day. She was experiencing emotions and desires with Pete that she honestly hadn't thought she was capable of feeling. That was one of the reasons she'd initially gravitated to older men—because none of the guys her age ever made her desire or crave anything.

Last night Pete had not only been gentle, but he'd offered her a proposition and hadn't tried forcing it on her. He'd left the decision up to her and tonight she would let him know she intended to take him up on it. Literally. With her lack of experience, that might be an impossible feat, but she was energized and ready to try.

Pete Higgins had tempted her enough. He aroused her even when he didn't realize he was doing so, just by being him.

She glanced down at herself. She had changed out of her long skirt and blouse and put on another cowgirl outfit. This was one she'd seen while shopping in Breckenridge. Although at the time she hadn't a clue where she would wear it, it had been way too cute to pass up.

It was a black rhinestone-adorned minidress with an attached petticoat. What she'd liked most was the metal-and-rhinestone horseshoe belt buckle that came with it. The outfit was so short on her that it barely hit midhigh, and the way the lapels were turned back showed a generous amount of cleavage.

It was simply scandalous. Myra smiled thinking how much she loved it. She couldn't wait to see Pete's expression when he saw her in it. Feeling a little nervous, she pushed her hair back from her neck and began pacing to the rhythm of the country music. A few beats later she stopped when she heard

the door closing on the main floor. She glanced toward the staircase.

Swallowing, she watched as Pete descended the stairs with his eyes glued to her. He had the note she'd written in his hand. He was here and all those things she'd thought she would be brave enough to do and say to him suddenly left her. Drawing in a deep breath, she tried willing them back.

He moved away from the stairs toward her while sliding the note into the back pocket of his jeans. She could tell by the way he was smiling while his gaze roamed over her outfit that he liked what she was wearing. The heated look in his eyes was enough to make her back up a few steps.

“Going somewhere?” he asked, coming to a stop in front of her.

Pete looked like the sexiest man alive and now it was her turn to roam her gaze over him. She'd seen him when he first entered Pam's acting school, but now she was really getting her fill. The only thing missing was the Stetson he'd been wearing. He'd removed it when he'd entered the house, but she was still wearing her cowgirl hat.

She nervously licked her lips. “No, I'm not going anywhere. You came.”

His chuckle was throaty and she was convinced the sound made the tips of her nipples harden. “Did you honestly think I wouldn't?”

At the moment, she couldn't think at all. She wanted to run her hands all over him, trace her tongue across his lips and—

“You want to dance, Myra?”

His question caught her off guard, but she quickly recovered, or at least tried to. She had invited him to this party, so she needed to take ownership of it. But still, she appreciated that he was being patient with her.

“Yes, I want to dance.”

He opened his arms and she went into them. She wasn't sure what song was playing. At the moment the only thing that

mattered was she was here and so was he. Their bodies were pressed close together and his arms were wrapped around her as they swayed to the slow beat. She felt him. All of him. Especially his erection poking her middle. That was a sign that he wanted her and she knew without a doubt that she wanted him, as well.

She looked up at him and the arousal in his gaze nearly made her weak in the knees. He then smiled that same smile that always whacked her senses. Swallowing, she said, “I hope you don’t mind me taking over your man cave.”

“No, it looks good. You look good. I love your outfit. It’s definitely an eye-catcher. I’m glad you didn’t wear it to the Wild West show tonight. Otherwise, I would have had to hurt somebody.”

His words heightened the beat of her pulse. “You mean you would have arrested them, right?”

“No, I would have hurt them first and arrested them later.”

That made her smile because it hinted at a possessive nature she wasn’t used to him demonstrating. And when he tightened his arms around her, she felt a throbbing sensation near his middle. Suddenly, he stopped dancing and stared at her. The silence in the room wasn’t helping. The air between them seemed to thicken with sexual energy.

And then he leaned in and kissed her. He wrapped his arms around her even more tightly as his mouth took hers with a hunger that she felt in every part of her body. They’d kissed before, a few times, so why did it feel like every time their mouths joined there was some kind of awakening in her body? His kisses could arouse her, make her desire things that simply astounded her. She was feeling the full impact of Pete’s kiss and she couldn’t help but moan her pleasure over and over again.

* * *

Pete finally released Myra’s mouth on a low, throaty groan. Then, sweeping her off her feet, he carried her over to the blanket in front of the fireplace. Never had he known such a

responsive woman and he loved hearing every moan she made.

And he loved touching her, probably way too much. He couldn't recall ever wanting a woman with this much intensity...and that included Ellen.

With Ellen he'd had the desires of a young buck feeling his way around. Now he was a man with a different type of sexual hunger. He wanted to do more than just seduce Myra, more than merely satisfy primitive urges. He wanted to embark on emotions he'd long ago laid to rest. Miraculously, Myra was enticing him to reconnect. He'd tried ignoring her and had failed. She was not a woman a man could ignore, at least not for long or in some cases, not at all.

Getting on his knees, he joined her on the blanket and then stretched out beside her. He didn't want to rush her, was determined to make tonight as pleasurable for her as he knew it would be for him. After tonight she wouldn't remember any other before him. Why that was important to him he wasn't sure. All he knew was that it was.

He kissed her again and when he finally released her mouth, he whispered, "If I ever do anything that makes you uncomfortable, I want you to let me know. Okay?"

She stared at him through glazed hazel eyes and slowly nodded. For him it was important that she not only know that but believe it. The cop in him knew there had been more to her actions last night than she'd shared with him. He hoped in time she would share it all. For now, he'd resolved that whatever bad experiences she might have had, he would replace them with good ones.

"I'm wearing too many clothes," she whispered.

He smiled. Was that her way of letting him know she wanted to get naked? If so, he had no problem obliging her. "Then let me remove them."

Sitting up, he gently pulled her to face him. The flickering blaze from the fireplace was dancing all over her, making him burn even hotter for her. She was so beautiful and he loved

looking at her. And this outfit he was about to take off her had been hot. When he'd come down the stairs and seen her, his erection had nearly doubled in size. She didn't look like your ordinary cowgirl—she looked like a cowgirl out of every man's fantasy.

“Let's start here,” he said, removing her hat and placing it aside. He loved the way her hair looked all tumbled around her shoulders. Then he reached down for her feet so he could remove her boots and socks. She had pretty feet and her toes were painted a bright red. It occurred to him that he'd never paid much attention to a woman's feet before, just their legs. And tonight, with this outfit, she was showing a lot of hers and they were gorgeous.

“Did I tell you how much I like your outfit?”

Her chuckle was soft and sexy. “Yes, you told me.”

“As much as I like it, now it's time to take it off.”

She used the tip of her finger to trace along the collar of his shirt. “Do I get to take your outfit off of you?”

“Yes. I wouldn't want it any other way.”

His words seemed to please her and he knew what would please him was kissing her while undressing her. So he proceeded to do just that. By the time he had her down to her bra and panties, her lips were swollen. What it was about her mouth that made him want to devour it, he wasn't sure. All he knew was that he did.

“Sexy,” he said, running his fingers along the black lace of her matching bra and panties. He was careful not to touch her inner thigh, remembering what happened last night. But then he remembered what she'd told him this morning.

That she liked him touching her there.

“Now for this,” he said, releasing the clasp of her bra and easing the straps from her shoulders. His breath caught when the twin mounds were freed from confinement. Her breasts were perfect. His erection doubled in size. Leaning toward her, he lowered his head and eased a nipple between his lips.

* * *

Myra was convinced Pete was trying to drive her mad. What man sucked a woman's breasts this way? With enough suction that she could feel the tips hardening in his mouth. With enough pressure that it triggered sensations between her legs. She closed her eyes and cupped the back of his head, to hold him there. She cried out in protest when he pulled his mouth away, but he moved to the other nipple. She sighed out her pleasure over and over again.

When he finally released her breasts, he stared at her as his fingers eased toward her inner thighs. Tentative at first, as if to gauge her reaction. She knew why. To ease his mind, she whispered, "Like I told you, I love the feel of you touching me anywhere."

He smiled. "In that case, now for these," he said, inching his fingers beneath the black lace of her panties. In a movement that was swifter than anything she'd ever witnessed before, he lifted her hips just enough to ease the panties down her legs.

This was the very first time any man had seen her naked and she wasn't sure how she was supposed to handle such a thing. The blatant heat, the fire and desire she saw in his eyes made any awkwardness she might have felt nonexistent. Instead, she felt empowered.

"Now for *your* clothes," she whispered, reaching for his shirt.

She held his gaze while working free the buttons, not thinking about how many there were but about what she would find when she had them all undone. Then he licked his lips. She didn't have a clue as to why.

Myra only licked her lips when she was nervous about something and she couldn't see him being nervous about anything. It must have had another meaning altogether. He did it again and the motion did something to her, made her nipples harden even more.

Evidently he saw the look on her face. "You know what that means, right?"

She wasn't ready to let him know about her lack of experience. He would discover that soon enough. So for now, she lied and said, "Yes."

"Just making sure."

She had reached the last button and removed his shirt from a pair of masculine shoulders. She gazed at his stomach and flat chest and, giving in to temptation, she stroked her hand up and down his chest.

"Sweetheart, if you knew what your touch does to me, you wouldn't do that."

His words nearly undid her already capsized senses. "I'll be able to handle whatever that might be, Pete."

Instead of saying anything, he gave her a long, drugging kiss that had her whimpering. When he released her mouth, he eased her to her feet. "Now for my jeans. Do you want me to take over from here?"

She met his gaze and smiled. "I want to finish, but you can certainly help."

He nodded and ran his fingers across her nipples. "Just let me know when you need me to jump in."

She nodded. There was a first time for everything and it was her first time undressing a man.

Removing the huge belt buckle was easy. Undoing his zipper against a massive erection was another matter.

"Jump in," she finally said.

"No problem."

Not only did he unzip his pants for her, but he inched them past his waist so all she had to do was tug them down his legs so he could step out of them. That left him completely naked except for a sexy pair of black briefs. Hmm, Mr. Lawman had a downright sexy streak.

"One piece of clothing to go," she heard him say.

And she could just imagine what would happen when that last piece was gone. She reached out and gently tugged the

briefs down a pair of masculine thighs to uncover what he was packing.

Lordy.

She looked at him and swallowed deeply. Before she could say anything, he said throatily, "I'll take over from here. Time for you to enjoy."

* * *

Pete couldn't help it when his gaze shifted down to Myra's womanly core. She was beautiful and he wanted to kiss her there. He *needed* to kiss her there. Brand her. Claim her. Possess her. His erection throbbed at the thought of doing all three.

He fought back a groan at the thought of kissing her all over, especially there. Without saying anything, he gently eased her back down on the blanket and kissed her mouth with a hunger he felt all through his body.

He moved from her mouth and kissed around her face and neck, eagerly making his way down south, kissing every area he traveled.

"Pete..."

He knew why she had moaned his name. It was as if his tongue had a mind all its own and was licking her everywhere, loving the taste and texture of her. When he'd reached the area between her legs, she grabbed his shoulders as if to stop him from going further. He remembered what he'd told her from the beginning. If he ever did anything that made her uncomfortable, to let him know.

Pete lifted his mouth from her stomach to stare up at her. "Has a man ever gone down on you before, Myra?"

She nervously licked her lips. "No."

He nodded and then, wanting to assure her that her lack of experience in that particular area was fine with him, he said, "Then I am happy to introduce you to the wonder of it all. Is that okay?"

“Yes.”

He then lowered his mouth back to her stomach to pick up where he'd left off. He licked her, loving the taste of her skin. He kissed below her navel and continued moving lower.

He felt her tense and looked back up at her to make sure she was okay. “We’re good?”

She nodded, a tentative smile on her lips. “No, *you’re* good. I don’t think you know how you’re making me feel, Pete.”

He wanted to tell her that she hadn’t felt anything yet, but decided he could show her better than tell her. He lowered his head and gently nudged her thighs apart. Her feminine scent was intoxicating. She moaned his name the moment he slid his tongue inside her.

* * *

Not wanting to wake Ciara, Myra fought back a scream of pleasure. And when his tongue began moving inside her with intense strokes, she fought back another scream while thrashing on the blanket. He finally used his hands to grip her thighs and hold her still. What on earth was his mouth doing to her? She wanted him to stop, but knew if he stopped she would die. Never had she experienced anything like this. All kinds of sensations were plummeting through her all at once.

And when his tongue went deeper and the strokes became more intense, she did release a scream. Her body was hit with what she knew had to be an orgasm. Her very first. Ever. She closed her eyes as she felt like she was undergoing some sort of out-of-body experience with Pete’s tongue still planted deep inside her.

Then suddenly another orgasm hit, this one stronger than the last. She felt the intensity of it in every bone. Her body bucked several times beneath his mouth, but he held tight to her hips, refusing to remove his tongue.

When the tremors slowly subsided, she felt Pete move away and she slowly opened her eyes. He was sliding on a condom. Then he came back and straddled her body.

“You’re ready for me now, baby,” he said as he eased into her.

She knew now was the time to tell him that not only had no man ever gone down on her before him, but none had gone inside of her before either. Moments later, when his body suddenly went still and he stared down at her, she knew it was too late. He’d figured things out for himself.

Before he could ask her anything, she placed her arms around his neck to force his mouth down to hers. Before their lips touched, she whispered, “We’re good?”

Instead of answering he pushed more into her tight womanly core until it seemed he couldn’t go any farther. He went still again, as if giving her time to adjust to the pressure of his engorged erection planted deep inside her.

Then he began moving, slow at first and then with more intensity. More vigor. It wasn’t long before his thrusts became long, hard and deep and she unwrapped her arms from his neck to grab hold of his shoulders. It was as if he was riding her the way he would ride Satin and she could feel his every moment.

Suddenly her body was hit with tingling sensations all over again, with more intensity. And this time she wasn’t alone. Pete threw his head back and let out a deep, guttural growl as his body bucked several times. They reached orgasmic pleasure together. She held on to him and he held on to her.

When the last of the tremors had passed through their bodies, he eased down beside her. Entwining their legs, he pulled her into his arms. The last thing she remembered before sleep claimed her was the feel of him softly caressing her stomach and whispering, “No, sweetheart. *You’re* good.”

* * *

Pete stopped the alarm before it could go off. The last thing he wanted was to wake the woman sleeping naked beside him. It had been one hell of a night. He’d wanted to be gentle, after he’d learned it was her first time, but she hadn’t let him. She’d deliberately brought out the lusty beast in him.

He found it amazing that at twenty-four she hadn't shared a bed with a man until last night. Until him. He'd had the honor of introducing her to pleasure and she'd told him so many times how much she had enjoyed it.

After that first time, he'd carried her upstairs where he joined her in a hot, sudsy tub bath. Then he'd toweled her dry and carried her to his bed. When she complained about them not drinking any of the wine, he'd gone back down to the man cave to snuff out the candles and grab the wine bottles and glasses. They'd sipped wine in bed, then made love all over again before dozing off to sleep.

She was the one who'd awakened him at two in the morning telling him it was her turn to do the licking. He wouldn't let her, simply because having her mouth on him would have killed him and he wasn't ready to die yet. In the end they'd made love again. And from the looks of it, she was sleeping peacefully now, and he figured she was just as satisfied as he was.

He wished he could stay in bed with her all day, but he had a job to go to and she had Ciara to take care of. However, there would be tonight and he was looking forward to coming home to her. Their days of ignoring each other were done.

Pete forced himself to remember that whatever they were sharing was short-term. She would be leaving Denver in a few weeks. He knew it and accepted it. The only thing they had was the present and he intended to take advantage of the time they had left. He refused to dwell on the fact that Myra Hollister was definitely everything a man could want in a woman.

She was everything he not only wanted but also what he needed.

“Good morning, lawman.”

He shifted in bed and smiled over at her. “Good morning. I didn't mean to wake you.”

“You didn't. I'm too wound up to sleep long after last night.”

“Because of last night you should be exhausted.”

She chuckled. “I’m not. Are you? Being an old man and all.”

He leaned toward her. “But you enjoyed this old man last night, right?”

“Immensely. I can’t describe exactly how I feel, Pete.”

* * *

Myra decided not to even try. All she knew was what they’d shared had been a game changer for her. She knew it and felt assured Pete knew it, as well. Just like they both knew this affair would end when Miss Bonnie returned. She tried not to let the thought bother her. He had his life here and she had hers someplace else.

She had entertained the thought of returning to Denver for the Westmoreland Charity Ball on New Year’s Eve, but now she wasn’t sure that was a good idea. What she should do was enjoy what they were sharing now, and when it was time for her to move on, to do so without looking back. Without coming back.

In the meantime...

“Pete?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

She wondered if he knew what the endearment did to her. “Do you know what I’d like?”

From the look in his eyes she knew he had an idea. “No, what would you like?”

“For you to leave me with something to think about all day until you return.”

The smile that appeared on his face was priceless. “That can definitely be arranged.”

He then pulled her into his arms.

Ten

“So, there you have it, Pete,” Detective Lewis Tomlin was saying.

“Carl Knight, who is serving time in prison for armed robbery, claims he buried his loot in Ms. Katherine’s backyard underneath that storage shed while he was hiding out from the Feds. It’s my guess that he shared that information with a fellow inmate who passed it to someone on the outside who’s trying to scare her into selling the house.”

Pete nodded. “Did you question Ms. Katherine about anyone trying to buy her house in the last year?”

“Yes,” Lewis said, “she did say that someone had shown up twice inquiring if she wanted to sell and both times she told them she didn’t. Said he was a nice man and that he gave her his business card in case she changed her mind.”

“Knowing Ms. Katherine, I bet she still had that card.”

“Yes. We put a trace on it and the name is connected to a trust. But I’m on it. Hopefully in a week I’ll have the name of the person that trust belongs to.”

Pete leaned forward in his chair. “Okay, and since we’re talking about money missing from a bank robbery, at some point we’ll need to get the FBI involved.”

When Lewis left his office, Pete leaned back in his chair. When would people learn that crime didn’t pay? He knew Lewis wouldn’t leave any stones unturned. But if whoever owned that trust couldn’t scare off Ms. Katherine, then what? He didn’t feel good about this entire thing.

He pressed a button on his desk phone. When his administrative assistant came on the line, he said, “Monica, find deputies Anderson and Sims. I want to see them.”

“Okay, Sheriff.”

He would instruct them to drive by Ms. Katherine’s home more frequently, especially at night. They were squad leaders

and would make sure it was done. Standing, he walked over to the window and looked out. He would never tire of this view of the mountains.

Glancing at his watch, it seemed the day was dragging by. It wasn't even lunchtime yet. He shook his head. He'd never been a clock-watcher when it came to his job, but now there were two special females waiting for him. Namely, Ciara Higgins and Myra Hollister.

It was hard to believe it had been almost two weeks since the night he and Myra first made love. Things had certainly changed since then. They now shared the same bed every night, and his day would start with them making love every morning. She also joined him for breakfast, usually preparing him pancakes...made of wheat of course...and turkey bacon and sausage. Her kind of food was beginning to grow on him, and he did feel healthier.

What he enjoyed most was at night, after they'd put Ciara to bed, when over dessert he would share with Myra how his day had gone. It felt nice having someone to come home to and share details with. Then they would go down to his man cave and watch a movie or football. When they retired for bed, it was together. He enjoyed sleeping with her at night and waking up with her in his arms every morning.

They spent their time talking about several subjects. However, the one thing they never talked about was the time when she would be leaving. He'd heard from Jason that Myra had approached Bella about staying at the inn after Bonnie came back. He intended to tell Myra she didn't have to do that. He certainly had enough room at his ranch.

Bottom line, he wasn't ready for her to leave and doubted he ever would be. However, he had to face the fact she *was* leaving. Therefore, he would do the only thing he could, which was to make every moment count.

He turned at the sound of his phone and then moved to click it on. "Sheriff Higgins."

"Pete, this is Pam."

He smiled as he settled into the chair behind his desk. “Hey, Pam, what can I do for you?”

“Dillon’s birthday is coming up and he doesn’t want us to make a fuss since a lot of the family will be here for the Westmoreland Charity Ball. But I wanted to at least prepare a special meal for this Friday’s chow-down. I’d love for you to make it, and please bring Myra and Ciara. I appreciated Myra’s help at the Wild West show.”

“Ciara and I will be there and I will let Myra know the invitation extends to her, as well.”

“Okay, thanks.”

He hoped Myra would attend with him. It’d be another moment to cherish.

* * *

“So, how are things going with that nanny gig?” Wallace asked Myra, after she’d put the casserole in the oven and sat down at the kitchen table to call him.

She’d just put Ciara down for her nap after feeding her lunch. From where Myra sat, she could see the Christmas tree in the living room. She would never forget the day they’d gotten it. And because this would be Ciara’s first Christmas with Pete, and he’d never thought of having a tree before, that had meant shopping for ornaments, as well. The two of them, with a little help from Ciara, had decorated it. Myra would never forget the look of happiness on the little girl’s face when Pete had switched on the lights for the first time. Even now, whenever they lit the tree, Ciara would sit in front of it and stare at the blinking lights.

“Myra?”

Wallace had asked her a question that she had yet to answer. “It’s going great. Ciara is wonderful.”

“And Ciara’s uncle?”

She wondered why Wallace would ask her about Pete. She wasn’t sure who knew that her and Pete’s relationship had

changed. They seldom went out. They now had a reason to stay in. She certainly hadn't breathed a word about anything to Wallace.

“Why would you ask me about her uncle?”

He paused and then said, “Well, you did say that early on he hadn't wanted to hire you because he thought you were too young.”

She couldn't help but smile at the memory. A lot had certainly changed since then. “Well, once I began working here and he saw how competent I was, his opinion changed.”

“I knew it would. I figured you would eventually win him over.”

Myra had news for Wallace. Pete had won her over, as well. She had fallen in love with him.

That fact couldn't be disputed even though she wished otherwise. But she lived with the evidence every day—when she looked forward to him coming home, when he found her in the kitchen, when he would pull her into his arms with a kiss...

“You don't have long now.”

Wallace's words pulled her back into the present. “I don't have long for what?”

“To work for the guy. Won't the regular nanny be back in two weeks?”

Yes, Miss Bonnie would be back and Pete wouldn't need Myra anymore. She and Pete never talked about her leaving because it was a foregone conclusion that she would be. She needed to go to Charleston and claim the company back and then turn it over to Wallace. But what then?

Pete was very much aware of when her last day would be. He hadn't shown any inclination that he'd want to see her again after she left. She doubted he knew she planned to remain in Denver until the day after Christmas. If he knew, would he invite her to spend Christmas with him and Ciara?

She'd known she had to leave, but she had fallen in love with him anyway.

On top of that, his heart still belonged to a dead woman.

“Myra?”

Again she'd left one of Wallace's questions hanging. “Yes, Miss Bonnie will be back in two weeks.” Then, deciding to change the subject, she said, “How are things going at the office?”

“So far, okay, but I have a feeling Baron and his friends are up to something. I don't know what, but it's not good. They have been whispering a lot amongst themselves.”

“They're probably trying to come up with a plan for stopping me from reclaiming the company. I talked to Lloyd the other day and he assures me there is nothing they can do. All I have to do is show up.”

Lloyd Kirkland had been the company attorney for years and one of her father's close friends. He'd been appalled at how Baron had managed to manipulate the stockholders into putting him in charge and replacing Wallace.

“According to Irene, they still think you're out of the country. Baron has hired someone to find you.”

Irene was one of the department heads and, like Lloyd, had worked for the company for years. She was loyal to Wallace and tried keeping him abreast of what Baron was up to.

“Let them try. I covered my tracks well. They will see me when it's time for them to see me.”

When she ended the call with Wallace, Myra decided to grab a nap for herself while Ciara slept. She and Pete made love every night before they went to sleep and in the mornings when they woke up. She wasn't used to such a vigorous routine.

She smiled when she thought about all they'd done together since making love that first time. Once he'd gotten over the fact that she was inexperienced, it was as if he intended to give her all the training she needed. She couldn't keep up with all

the positions they'd tried and the rooms where they'd made love. Her favorite spot still remained on a blanket in front of the fireplace.

Myra walked out of the kitchen the same time the front door opened and Pete walked in. "Pete! I didn't know you were coming home for lunch. Had I known, I would have made—"

"I didn't come home for lunch," he said, tossing his Stetson on the rack with perfect aim, all while walking toward her.

"Oh?"

"I came home for you."

The combination of what he'd said and how he'd said it caused the pulse at the base of her throat to throb. And she could only stare as he walked toward her, the epitome of masculinity.

When he came to a stop in front of her, he placed his hands at her waist and a surge of longing ripped through her.

"So what do you have to say to that, Myra Hollister?"

She started to speak and felt her breath wobble. So, instead of saying anything, she leaned up on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth against his. That was another thing she was in training for. Kissing 101. She took her time brushing her lips over his full and sexy ones. And then she used her tongue to lick the curve of his mouth and lower to his jawline.

Myra heard the way he was breathing and decided to exert a little pressure with her mouth and tongue. She was convinced that she hadn't been properly kissed until Pete. She continued to let her lips roam over his while teasingly licking, sucking and nibbling, loving how he let her do her thing while he fought for control. The hands holding her at the waist tightened as she greedily sucked his lower lip.

It didn't take long for Pete to grow impatient with her playing around with his mouth. Suddenly he crushed his mouth to hers. His hands plunged into her hair, as if to pull her head even closer so he could consume her.

Then, with the same intensity, he released her mouth, only to sweep her into his arms and head toward the bedroom.

Eleven

“So are you going to tell her?”

Pete lifted a brow at Derringer. They’d been standing on the other side of the room watching Dillon cut his birthday cake while the women were busy setting out plates. “Tell who what?”

Derringer rolled his eyes. “Myra Hollister. Are you going to tell her how you feel about her?”

Pete crossed his arms over his chest. “And just how do I feel about her?”

Derringer shook his head. “If you have to ask me, then you’re in worse shape than I thought. You love her. I can see that.”

“Can you?” Pete asked, before taking a sip of his punch.

“Sure can, and I hope you tell her before she leaves town.”

Pete didn’t say anything as he glanced across the room to where Myra stood holding Ciara while smiling and talking to Bella, Lucia and Bane’s wife, Crystal. She fit in well with them, the wives of the men he considered good friends. And Derringer was right.

He had fallen in love with her, even though he knew doing so had been a mistake.

They could have no future. She had a life beyond Denver, although he hadn’t a clue what she intended to do with it other than leave here. It was something they never talked about, a subject he avoided because the idea of her leaving was something he tried not to think about. But he didn’t have much time left with her so he had to think about it whether he wanted to or not.

What could he offer her? He tried to ignore the voice that said: *You have your love to offer.*

“Well?”

Derringer reclaimed his wayward thoughts. “Well, what?”

“Are you going to stop her from leaving?”

Stop her from leaving?

“Not without a warrant,” he said, trying to bring a little lightheartedness into the conversation.

Derringer wasn’t having it. “Don’t be a smart-ass, Pete. Are you or are you not going to tell her you love her to stop her from leaving?”

“No, I’m not. I might desire Myra but my duty is to my niece.”

“Then I think you are making a huge mistake.”

* * *

Although Myra was contributing to the conversation with the ladies around her, she was conscious of Pete’s eyes on her. She was tempted to return his stare but she didn’t for fear that he would look into her very soul. And see her love. Feel her love. Discover the thing she didn’t want exposed.

“So, Myra, you and Pete share the same birthday?”

Megan Westmoreland’s question reclaimed her immediate attention. Did they? She’d had no reason to ever ask when his birthday was. “If we do, I didn’t know it.”

“Pete is also a Christmas baby,” Lucia said, grinning. “That’s the one thing I remember about his parents while growing up. They would come into Dad’s paint store around the holidays. Mr. Higgins was good with his hands and every holiday he would make something for Pete. Since Pete was a Christmas baby, he wanted to make a special birthday gift for him so he wouldn’t feel cheated out of a birthday celebration.”

Myra took a sip of her punch, remembering her parents did the same thing for her birthday. They always made it special. This would be her first without them. “If I was going to be around, I would bake him a cake, but I’m leaving the day after Christmas.”

“You’re still leaving?” Bella asked, surprised.

“Yes, I’m still leaving.” Myra could see the confused looks on the women’s faces. “Why do you ask?”

“We thought... We were hoping that something was going on between you and Pete,” Megan said, hesitating before getting it out there.

Myra knew it would be a waste of time to lie to the three women. Besides, women who were in love would recognize that same emotion in another woman and there was no denying that she had fallen in love with Pete.

“Yes, something is going on, but not what you think,” she said softly, feeling the impact of the words she’d spoken. She knew they understood her meaning.

“I think you might be wrong,” Megan said gently. “I’ve known Pete all my life. He’s been best friends with Derringer and Riley forever. I remember Dad would often tell him that if he continued to hang around with them as much as he did he would begin to look like a Westmoreland,” she said, chuckling. “There were times people thought he *was* a Westmoreland because he would go on a lot of family trips with us.”

She took a sip of her punch and added, “I know how hard he took Ellen’s death and how he shut himself off because of it. But over the past month I’ve seen him come to life. He began thawing out when Ciara got here, but now he’s back to being the Pete we all know and love. I think you might be underestimating his feelings for you, Myra.”

Megan’s words remained on Myra’s mind all through the ride home from Dillon’s party. They were like a seed in her heart that she wanted to bloom. Was she underestimating his feelings for her? Could there really be more between them than sex?

And what if there was? She would still have to leave to return to Charleston and handle that business with the company. It would be a smooth transition if Baron didn’t try making things difficult. Yet she couldn’t see him agreeing to

leave without a fuss. Either way, she would love nothing more than to have it settled and be done with it so she could return to Pete and Ciara—if he truly cared for her like the Westmoreland ladies thought.

On top of that, Myra couldn't ignore the call she'd gotten from Wallace two days ago. Baron had run into one of his old college girlfriends and she'd mentioned seeing Myra in Breckenridge, Colorado, around Thanksgiving. That meant there was a good chance Baron would be moving his search to that area. Wallace felt she should tell Pete what was going on. She disagreed. Baron was her problem and the last thing she intended to do was get Pete involved.

“You're quiet. Is everything all right, Myra?”

She blinked, realizing they had reached Pete's ranch. Forcing a smile, she looked over at him. “I just have a lot on my mind. Miss Bonnie will be returning next week.”

“But that doesn't mean you have to move out. Derringer mentioned you intended to stay at Bella's inn for a week before leaving town.”

“Yes, those are my plans. I do have to move out, Pete.” Surely he didn't think she could stay here and continue their relationship with Miss Bonnie in the house?

As if he read her thoughts he said, “We're adults, Myra. We shouldn't have to sneak around. Besides, I'm too old for that sort of thing.”

“This is coming from a man who didn't want to hire me because of possible talk?” she asked, frowning.

“And you're the one who said you didn't care what people might say or think about you living with me.”

She rolled her eyes. “We're not talking about people, Pete. We're talking about Miss Bonnie.”

“I know. But you don't have to worry about Bonnie. I got a call from her today and she asked if she could remain with her sister an additional week. I think she might feel guilty about leaving her alone for the holidays. I told her I would talk to you to see if you could remain another week. Would you?”

Undisguised happiness swelled inside of Myra. That meant she would have an extra week to spend with Pete and Ciara. That would make leaving even harder, but she would take it and deal with the consequences later.

Drawing in a deep breath, she said, “Yes, I’ll remain for an additional week.”

* * *

Pete woke up the next morning and glanced over at the clock. Although it was Saturday, he usually would get out of bed early anyway since it was his day to take care of Ciara. Myra was still entitled to two days off even though she never really took them anymore. She seemed content to spend her off days hanging out at the ranch with him and Ciara and he didn’t have any problem when she did. Regardless, he didn’t want to take advantage of her time in case she had something else to do.

But then he had made sure she would be free this weekend for an entirely different reason.

He glanced at the empty spot in his bed wondering how Myra had gotten up without waking him.

He hadn’t told her yet, but he’d asked Charity Maples to babysit Ciara for him tonight because he planned to take Myra out on a date. Two days ago, he’d made reservations at Barnacles for dinner and figured they could take in a movie afterward.

Pete chuckled. He wasn’t as slow as Derringer thought. Although the timing wasn’t right to tell her how he felt about her. Chances were, she didn’t feel the same way, and there was no way he could stop her from leaving. What he *could* do was give her a reason to come back. He no longer felt he had to chose between duty and desire. He could have both.

Getting out of bed he quickly went into the bathroom and washed up, brushed his teeth and shaved. A short while later he was walking out of his bedroom and headed toward the

kitchen where the sound of voices could be heard. Namely, Myra and Ciara. They were both singing...or trying to sing.

He couldn't help the smile he felt touch his lips. Myra had made his house a home and he wasn't sure how he and Ciara would handle her absence. Bonnie taking an additional week had postponed the inevitable but for how long?

At least Myra would be here on Christmas Day, since she was leaving the day after. He had assured her he could handle things for a day until Bonnie got back.

Walking into the kitchen, he said, "Good morning."

Two pairs of feminine eyes glanced over his way. He would give anything for them to keep that look of happiness in their gazes when they saw him.

"Da-da," Ciara said, reaching out her arms to him.

He headed toward her, but not before stopping in front of Myra to place a lingering kiss on her lips. "I didn't hear you leave the bed this morning."

She gave him a mischievous grin. "I guess one of us was exhausted for some reason, Mr. Lawman."

He leaned in close to her ear and said, "I guess I should be thankful you aren't calling me Mr. Old Man."

She threw her head back and laughed. "I must admit I am finding it hard to believe that you're letting this young woman get the best of you."

He smiled. "Only because I'm exhausted from getting the best of you."

Now he was the one to throw his head back to laugh; he had effectively put her at a loss for words. And while he had her in that condition, he figured it would be a good time to tell her about his plans.

"By the way," he said, after taking Ciara out of the high chair. "I hired a babysitter for Ciara tonight."

Myra looked at him dumbfounded. "A babysitter? Why?"

He knew he had to be careful how he answered. “Because I want to show my appreciation for all you’ve done for me and Ciara while Bonnie has been gone. I want to thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Pete. Besides, are you okay with a sitter keeping Ciara? She won’t stay with just anybody.”

He studied Myra’s features and wondered if she’d gotten upset with what he’d said. For some reason she sounded annoyed.

“I do need to show you how much I appreciate what you’ve done and as far as a sitter goes, Charity is seventeen and the daughter of one of my deputies. She’s kept Ciara a number of times for me in the past. She’s a responsible teen and she and Ciara get along just fine. There’s no need for you to worry about anything.”

* * *

Myra knew she sounded pretty ungrateful and that wasn’t how she wanted to come off. Taking her to dinner was truly a nice gesture on his part. Just because she was in love with him didn’t mean she should expect him to feel the same way about her.

“Then after dinner we would take in a movie.”

She stared at him. Dinner and movie? Did he not know those things constituted a date?

That was probably the last thing he wanted but those were his plans, not hers. He would figure out the mistake he’d made when he ran into people who knew him and recognized her as the nanny, and noted the two of them were out and about without Ciara. She would be leaving after next week. He would be the one left here to deal with talk because he’d sent out the wrong message in trying to show his appreciation.

She wished she could tell him that she didn’t want his appreciation but his love, but that was out of the question. She had to take care of her family business, and his heart was still taken.

“Do you not want to go to dinner with me?”

She wanted to go. She valued him showing his appreciation. She'd get over her feelings.

He had explained his intentions from the beginning. He had not been looking for a lasting relationship. It was only about sex. It wasn't like he hadn't told her because he had, and she'd accepted his terms.

"Yes, I'd love to go out to dinner with you, Pete," she said.

And just like he wanted to show his appreciation to her, she could certainly show hers to him, in her own special way.

* * *

It wasn't too late when they returned home. Charity told them what a great little girl Ciara had been, before leaving in her own car.

"I like her," Myra said about Charity, when Pete joined her in Ciara's room. They both stood over the little girl's bed just watching her sleep. Pete knew his niece had captured Myra's heart the same way she'd captured his. Even if Myra didn't care about seeing him again after leaving Denver, she would be tempted to return to see Ciara.

"Want to join me for a cup of coffee, lawman?" Myra said, smiling.

He smiled back. "I don't mind if I do, cowgirl."

Because he had such a wide hallway, they managed to walk down the hall side by side while holding hands, which was something they'd done at the movies. Dinner had been great and the movie had been entertaining, as well. They'd run into a number of people he knew, most of them his age, and they hadn't found it newsworthy that he was out on date with his niece's nanny. In fact, when he had introduced her to them, he'd introduced Myra as a good friend.

He sat down at the table while she got the coffee going. He liked watching her move around his kitchen, loved the movements of her hips and the sway of her hair around her shoulders. When she turned around, catching him staring, she smiled.

“I enjoyed dinner and the movie, Pete. Thanks for taking me.”

“I’m glad you did and you’re welcome.” He wanted to suggest that they do it again, but he didn’t want to bring up the fact that she was leaving soon.

She placed his cup of coffee in front of him and then joined him at the table with hers.

Finally, he decided to ask, “Are you looking forward to returning to Charleston?” She didn’t answer right away. Could it be that she would miss him and Ciara? He knew they would miss her.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to returning home.”

He didn’t say anything as he sipped his coffee, wondering how he was going to let her leave when the time came. “You’ll be leaving Denver before the coldest part of our winter.”

“I won’t miss that.”

Because he had to know, he asked, “Will you miss me?”

She met his gaze and held it for a long moment. “Most definitely. I’m going to miss you, Pete.”

A surge of passionate energy passed between them and they placed their coffee cups down at the same time. Who got up from their seat first, Pete wasn’t sure. Nor did it matter. All he knew was that Myra was in his arms and he was kissing her in a way he hoped let her know he would also miss her. Miss kissing her. Miss making love to her. Miss seeing her. Miss talking to her. He would miss her in ways he couldn’t even imagine right now.

Their tongues tangled with a desperation and hunger he’d never experienced, never with such urgency as this. The cause might have been knowing they were racing against time. Soon they would have to say their goodbyes. Now, though, they were succumbing to unbridled passion.

Suddenly, he swept her off her feet into his arms. He’d intended to make it to his bedroom, but he only made it to the

dining room before he knew he had to have her now. “I need you now, baby. I can’t wait.”

After placing her back on her feet, Pete yanked his shirt from his pants and proceeded to take it off while watching her remove her own clothes. It didn’t matter to him that this was the first time he’d ever stripped naked in his dining room. He knew before it was all said and done, he would be doing a hell of a lot more in this dining room.

She was back in his arms and he was kissing her again with a fervor he felt in every part of his body, especially in his throbbing erection. He broke off the kiss, needing to touch and taste her everywhere. He needed to feel his hands glide over her breasts, enjoying how her nipples hardened beneath his fingers.

He needed to know if she was ready for him, so he lowered his hands to the area between her legs. She moaned when he touched her there, and he eased his finger inside of her. Yes, she was ready for him.

Lifting her up, he placed her on the dining room table and wrapped her legs around his neck. Then, nudging her thighs apart, he thrust into her, going as deep as he could go. And when he was satisfied he couldn’t go any further, he held tight to her hips and began moving in and out of her. He was filled with a greed that went beyond anything he’d ever experienced before. It was as if he’d become insatiable, but only for her.

With this position he not only felt her but he could look at her, see the play of emotions on her face caused by his every thrust. He loved watching her expressions and knowing he was the cause. As if she needed to see his emotions as well, she used her inner muscles, as if trying to milk every single thing out of him.

It was then that he grasped he wasn’t wearing a condom. That realization must have shown in his expression, because she whispered, “I’m on birth control and I’m safe.”

“And I’m safe, too,” he said, continuing to pump hard into her.

When he felt her begin to shudder, he leaned in and captured her mouth as the same orgasm that struck her hit him, as well. His body bucked and then bucked again as he poured into her, the first time he'd done such a thing with any woman.

But he was doing it with her. The woman he loved with every part of his being. The woman who didn't have a clue what she meant to him. He wanted her to have it all. He kept thrusting until there was nothing left to give. It was only then that he released her mouth and slumped down on her. Burying his face between the most gorgeous pair of breasts, and the tastiest.

At that moment Pete knew the hardest thing he would ever have to do would come on the day he would have to let her go.

Twelve

Pete tossed the pencil on his desk, leaned back in his chair and placed the palms of his hands at the back of his neck. He'd been doing that all morning, in the middle of reading or writing a report. That was when thoughts of Myra would flash through his mind.

It had been almost a week since their date on Saturday night, when he'd taken her to dinner and a movie and then they'd later made love on his dining room table. He still smiled at the memory and he had new admiration for that table and its sturdiness.

He tried not to think about how time seemed to be quickly going by. Christmas was next week. And he'd fallen deeper and deeper in love with Myra. He tried showing her every time they made love without saying the words. A couple of times during the throes of passion the words nearly slipped out anyway. She still hadn't decided if she would return for the Westmoreland Charity Ball on New Year's Eve.

Although she'd never said she felt anything for him, whenever they made love he swore he could feel her emotion. A part of him wanted to believe a woman like Myra could not share with him what she'd shared, holding back nothing, if she didn't care. Or was it mere wishful thinking on his part?

He would soon find out because he planned on telling her how he felt tonight. He couldn't kiss her again, hold her in his arms and make love to her again, without her knowing that he loved her. She might think it was just sex for him, but it was time she discovered it was a lot more. Then he would convince her that if she gave him a chance, she could love him, too.

At least he was praying that she could.

He looked up at the knock on the door. "Come in."

Lewis came in smiling, looking pleased with himself, and Pete figured he should. A week ago, Lewis had traced that trust to a corporation in New York, and a few days later an

arrest had been made. Yesterday, the FBI had brought in equipment to scan the perimeter of Ms. Katherine's backyard and they'd uncovered the loot that had been hidden there. The recovery had made national news. Because of all the long hours Lewis had put in trying to solve the case, Pete had given him extra days off. He would be leaving tomorrow to take his family to visit his wife's parents in Boulder.

"Your first day off and you couldn't resist coming here anyway?"

Lewis dropped down in the chair in front of Pete's desk. "I needed to wrap up a few things before leaving. How are you going to handle things without me?"

Pete chuckled. "I'll manage."

At that moment the intercom on Pete's desk went off. "Yes, Monica?"

"Ms. Katherine is on the line and she says it's important that she talk to you."

Pete glanced over at Lewis and raised a brow as he said, "Okay, put her through."

When the connection was made, Pete placed the call on speaker so Lewis could listen in on the conversation since he was the one who'd worked on her case. "Ms. Katherine, don't tell me you're seeing more ghosts," Pete said jokingly.

"Of course not, Peterson, but there's something strange going on."

"Strange how?" he asked, reclining back in his chair.

"I met with Lucille and Alma today. We're knitting holiday hats for the babies at the hospital. And they told me a well-dressed man was going around their neighborhood asking questions."

Pete lifted a brow. Lucille's and Alma's homes were at least a good four to five miles from where Ms. Katherine lived. "What kind of questions?"

"They were about your nanny."

Pete sat up straight in his chair and frowned. “My nanny?”

“Yes. Ms. Hollister. The man knew her name and even had a picture of her and everything. Said he was looking for her, but didn’t tell them why. Of course Lucille and Alma didn’t tell him anything. They told me about it and I told them I would pass the information on to you to tell Ms. Hollister. The man didn’t look dangerous, but you can’t take any chances these days. You don’t think he’s an ex-husband, do you?”

“No,” Pete said, his frown deepening. “Myra has never been married.” He was damn well certain of that. “Thanks for telling me. I’ll pass the information on to Myra. If the man comes back, tell Ms. Alma and Ms. Lucille to let me know. Did the man say how he could be reached?”

“No, he didn’t tell them anything, which is another reason they found the man odd.”

Pete found that odd, as well. “I appreciate the information. Goodbye, Ms. Katherine.” He then clicked off the phone.

“Who would be looking for your nanny?” Lewis asked Pete.

Pete stood. “I don’t know but I intend to find out. Enjoy your time off.”

Lewis nodded, standing, as well. “Is there anything you need me to do? I can delay my trip another day if—”

“No,” Pete said, pushing his chair to his desk. “There’s no need for you to do that. I was going home for lunch anyway, so that gives me a chance to ask Myra about it.”

Twenty minutes later, Pete was pulling into his driveway. On the way home, all kinds of scenarios ran through his mind. It could very well be an insurance agent since her parents had been killed a few months ago. But why would an insurance man be going around showing her picture? Sounded to Pete like a process server or bounty hunter, which didn’t make sense. She would have told him if she was in some kind of trouble. Wouldn’t she?

Then there was another possibility. She was being stalked... like Ellen had been. She’d told Bonnie she’d come to Denver because of her parents’ deaths and that she needed to get away.

What if there was more to that story? His hand tightened on the steering wheel, not wanting to go there, but his mind was trying to do that very thing. Now he was getting damn paranoid and there was no reason for that. But the thought of not knowing was driving him crazy.

He started to call out to her the minute he opened the door, but caught himself. If Ciara was taking a nap he didn't want to wake her. He went into the kitchen and found it empty, but something was baking in the oven. He left the kitchen to head down the hall the exact moment Myra was walking out of Ciara's room.

She saw him and threw her hand to her chest and took a deep breath. "Pete! You scared me. I thought you said you weren't coming home for lunch."

He tried reining in all those rampant emotions hitting him at once. "Do you know why a man is going around town looking for you, Myra?"

* * *

Breaking eye contact with Pete, Myra took a slow, deep breath as she stared down at the floor. She should have known Baron wouldn't give up on trying to find her. She should have taken heed of Wallace's warning.

"Myra? I asked you a question."

She snapped her head up and met Pete's gaze. She didn't like his tone. He sounded angry. What did he have to be upset about? It wasn't him with the issue of a ruthless brother. "Yes, I know why he's here. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to check on dinner." She brushed by him to walk to the kitchen.

"Wait just a damn minute!" he said, grabbing hold of her wrist.

She jerked her hand from him. "Pete, what is wrong with you? Please lower your voice or you'll wake Ciara. I just put her down for her nap." She then turned toward the kitchen and he followed.

Myra still didn't understand what he was upset about. She should be the angry one. All her calculated plans to make Baron believe she was out of the country had gotten blown to bits because one of his ex-girlfriends had seen Myra that day in Breckenridge. Well, she had news for her brother and that witch of a mother of his. She would not hide out like a criminal anymore.

Entering the kitchen, she walked over to the oven to check on the baked chicken, very much aware of Pete moving behind her. When she turned around, he was standing in the middle of the kitchen with a fierce frown on his face and his arms crossed over his chest. "You owe me an explanation, Myra."

A part of her knew she did. She was living in his house and taking care of his niece. If someone was going around town looking for her, he should be told why. "Yes, I do owe you an explanation and I will give you one, Pete, but you have no reason to be angry about it. You and Ciara were never in any danger."

He frowned. "Danger? What in the world are you involved in?"

She disliked his accusations even more. "I am not involved in anything and I resent you thinking that. Maybe we shouldn't have this conversation after all—it's not like I have to confide in you. I'm leaving soon, and all we've been sharing is a relationship that's not going anywhere."

She watched him grit his teeth and his neck seemed to expand while he fought for control. He looked like a great specimen of furious masculinity with his tight thighs and heaving chest. She had never seen him this angry before.

He took a couple of steps toward her and pointed at her. "You think that's all it's been, Myra? Nothing but a relationship that's not going anywhere?"

His question surprised her and she lifted her chin and met his intense glare. "What else am I supposed to think, Pete?"

He stiffened. She watched his already tight muscles appear to tighten even more. Then she said, "I clearly recall your

proposition. So yes, all we've shared is a relationship to nowhere and I'm fine with that. If I hadn't been, I would not have slept with you." And she didn't regret any of the times she had.

He took a closer step to her. "Don't try changing the subject. I want to know why some man is looking for you."

Myra rolled her eyes. "Change the subject? You're the one who wanted me to explain what I meant by *relationship*, as if you didn't already know."

"Answer my question, Myra," he said in a tone that indicated his patience was running thin.

In a way, she didn't want to tell him. She didn't want to explain how a brother could treat his sibling this way, especially when Pete and his brother had shared such a close and loving relationship. He had suffered a loss when Matt had died and now he was caring for his brother's daughter, giving her everything he knew his brother would want her to have. Especially love. All Myra's brother felt toward her was loathing.

"Myra!"

She jumped. "Will you stop screaming?"

"I am not screaming," he said, lowering his voice somewhat. "Now answer my question."

Moving away from the stove, she walked over to the table to sit down in a chair. She needed to sit. Just the thought that Baron had tracked her here was too much to take in at the moment. She glanced at Pete. He was still standing in the same spot. Still angry. Drawing in a deep breath, she said, "The man was sent by someone to find me. The reason I came to Denver was to hide out and I thought I'd done a good job of leading the person to believe I was out of the country somewhere, so he would have no reason to look for me here."

"He?" Pete all but roared. "You're being stalked? By whom?" Before she could respond he said, "Some men are crazy. They *want*. Nothing else matters. They will do anything

to have you and if you turn them away, they will hurt you because the sick bastards have demented minds.”

Stalker? Maybe he assumed that because he was a law enforcement officer. Drawing in a deep breath, she said, “I wasn’t being stalked, Pete. I was being tracked. It was imperative to Baron that I not return to Charleston to cause problems, which is why that man is looking for me.”

“Baron? Who the hell is Baron? An ex-boyfriend? A guy who doesn’t understand the meaning of no?”

None of the above...

She still heard the anger in his voice but now it wasn’t directed at her, but rather the man he was inquiring about. She truly didn’t want to tell him any more than she had already.

Why did he want the identity of the person involved? She knew the answer. It wasn’t because he cared about her, but because he was a cop. A sheriff. It was his job to know details.

Myra met his intense stare. “Baron Hollister is my brother.”

* * *

Pete was certain he’d heard her wrong. Did she say her brother?

As if she read the confusion in his features, she said, “Yes, my brother. I told you we had the same father but different mothers. His mother, Charlene, was my dad’s first wife. They were married only four years and divorced when Baron was only two.”

Pete came to the table to sit down opposite her. “Are you saying your brother is stopping you from returning home?”

With a sigh, she nodded. “Yes and no. He’s never told me per se but he’s sent his warnings through others. I know Baron and how ruthless he can be and decided not to take chances. I needed to leave Charleston anyway and grieve after losing my parents. I chose not to tell him where I was going because I knew he would have someone watch me and let him know

when I was on my way back home. Not knowing my location upset him and he's been looking for me."

The thought that she knew someone was out there looking for her and hadn't told him anything about it had Pete boiling in rage. "I think you need to start at the beginning."

He listened as Myra told him everything and the more he heard, the angrier he got. As far as he was concerned, Baron Hollister was a fool. Myra had allowed him to get away with it when she could have reported his threats. She should have told someone. She should have told him. She had been living under his roof and sleeping in his bed, yet she hadn't trusted him enough to confide what her brother was doing to her. Just like Ellen hadn't confided in him about the stalker's threats.

While listening to Myra, that day twelve years ago came back to him. Ellen had told her best friend about the threats but not him. In the end, the man had taken her life. Pete recalled sitting in this very kitchen while listening to Sheriff Harper tell him that Ellen's death hadn't been an accident but an intentional, malicious act. The man had been arrested and, after being told his purchase of the firecrackers had been captured on a video camera inside Paul Markam's feed store, he'd confessed.

Suddenly, those memories became unbearable, almost suffocating to the point where Pete couldn't breathe. He needed to get out of there. Standing quickly and without saying a word, he crossed the room and walked out the back door.

His mind was filled with memories of Ellen's death as well as all the things Myra had just told him. All the things that, like Ellen, Myra *hadn't* told him.

Within minutes he had Satin saddled and was riding off, no particular destination in mind. He had to get away and think. So he kept riding.

In his lifetime he had fallen in love with two women, and neither had trusted him enough to tell him what was happening in their lives, even though he could have helped. He would not

have let them face anything alone. He would have taken care of them. He would have been there for them.

It wasn't long before he'd come to the edge of his property, which connected to Gemma Lake. In the distance, across the way, he saw all the wild horses running loose on Westmoreland land. Bringing Satin to a stop, he dismounted and sat on a huge tree stump and gazed at both the lake and the horses. The water indicated calmness while the horses displayed just the opposite. He could feel their untamed energy. Pretty much like the energy flowing through him now. Untamed and unmanageable.

He had to come to terms with the fact that life was sometimes unpredictable. Unruly. Undisciplined. That was one of the reasons why he'd wanted to become a lawyer. To battle the bad guys. To bring order. Then after Ellen's death, he'd been even more determined to do so.

Now, twelve years later, he'd fallen in love again. When Myra had walked into his life, he hadn't been ready for her and had tried to fight what he'd felt. But it seemed fate had decreed she was to be a part of his life, for better or for worse.

He had accepted weeks ago that he loved her, but could he accept her not telling him when her life was in possible danger?

Yes, he could accept it because he loved her, mistakes and all. More than anything, he needed to let her know his feelings for her went beyond the bed they shared every night. He needed her to know that he was there to help fight her battles, whatever they were, and that she wasn't alone. She would never be alone because she would always have him and Ciara.

It was time to let her know that.

"Any reason you're sitting here staring into space, Pete?"

He turned at the sound of Riley Westmoreland's voice. "No reason. What are you doing out here and not at the office?" Although Riley might enjoy the outdoors, he worked in an office setting in the Westmoreland family-owned Blue Ridge

Management Company. Most of the time he was in a business suit instead of Western wear.

Riley chuckled. "I decided to play hooky today. Everyone needs to do that every once in a while."

Before Pete could respond, his cell phone rang and he saw it was Lewis. "Hold that thought a sec," he said to Riley before clicking on his phone. "Any reason you're calling me? Need I remind you again that you were given time off?"

"Hey, consider it the former FBI agent in me, but I couldn't leave town until I checked out something. Namely, why someone was in town looking for your nanny. I decided to investigate and you won't believe what I found out."

Pete listened to what Lewis was saying and a frown covered his features. "I'm on my way."

He looked over at Riley. "I need to get back to town immediately and I'm closer to your place than I am to mine. Can you give me a ride? I'll get one of my men to bring me back home later."

"Sure."

Pete got on his horse and, like in the old days, he and Riley raced across the meadows to where Riley lived, a few minutes away on one hundred acres of land he called Riley's Station. Minutes later and they were in Riley's car and on their way into town.

"Hey, we traded one type of horsepower for another," Riley said jokingly, as he drove his two-seater sports car down the interstate. When Pete didn't respond to his jest, he said, "I hope what's going on at police headquarters is not too bad."

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Figured as much," Riley said. "So what had you sitting on that stump and looking into space?"

Pete decided to be honest with the man who for years had been one of his best friends. "Women and their secrets."

Riley chuckled. "They all have them. Alpha reminds me of that often."

Alpha was Riley's wife. The one who'd turned the once womanizer into a one-woman man. The one who'd made Riley burn his playa card and decide he wanted marriage instead.

Pete glanced over at Riley. "But when it's a case of their life being threatened..."

"You know what I think, Pete?"

He truly didn't want to know because the last thing he wanted was a Riley Westmoreland lecture, especially after that phone call he'd gotten from Lewis. "What?"

"At some point you need to stop blaming yourself for Ellen's death. Yes, maybe things might have turned out differently had she told you she was being harassed by that guy, but things could have taken another turn, and I think she knew it and tried to avoid it."

Pete lifted a brow. "What other turn?"

"You had just gotten accepted into the police academy and were still in training. Had she told you, being the hothead that you still were at the time, you would have gone after that guy and whipped his ass. Of course you would have told me and Derringer about it. Then we would have whipped his ass right along with you and all three of us would have gotten into trouble."

"Yes, but at least Ellen would still be alive."

"We won't ever know that for certain, Pete. There's no telling how he would have retaliated. Personally, I think he would have gone after the both of you. If you recall, Sheriff Harper also found that box of explosives in his house. Harper figured the bastard planned on blowing up the church the day of your wedding."

Pete always thought that as well, especially when the address of the church was found on a slip of paper in a drawer in the man's apartment. But although the man admitted to throwing the firecracker, he wouldn't confess to anything he had planned with the explosives.

“I’ve watched you with Myra, Pete. Don’t you think it’s time to admit how you feel about her?”

“You’re late, Ry. I have admitted it to myself.”

“But not to her?”

Pete shook his head. “No.”

A frown touched Riley’s face. “You haven’t told her?”

Pete drew in a deep breath. “No, I haven’t told her.”

“Damn, man. What are you waiting on?”

Pete didn’t say anything. He’d planned to tell her tonight and now he knew those plans hadn’t changed.

* * *

Myra stood at the kitchen window and looked out. Pete had been gone for a while now. Where was he? His truck was parked outside, which meant he hadn’t gone back to work. Wherever he’d gone it was on horseback and it was now getting dark.

Ciara had awakened from her nap and Myra had played with her while listening for Pete. Maybe he’d found what she’d told him so repulsive that he’d left. What she needed to tell him was what she’d been trying to tell him all along. It wasn’t his problem. It was hers and she would deal with Baron when she would have the upper hand. Not a minute before.

She fed Ciara dinner and then played with her some more before giving her a bath. Pete still hadn’t returned. She knew he could take care of himself but that didn’t stop her from worrying and caring. She loved him and couldn’t help being concerned.

“Da-da.”

She glanced over at Ciara, who was standing in her crib. The little girl knew this was usually the time of day when her uncle would come in and rock her to sleep while singing her a lullaby. After a while, sleep took over her and Ciara slumped down in the bed and dozed off.

Myra had taken her own bath and was in her bed when she heard the sound of Pete returning. Footsteps passed her bedroom door headed for his bedroom. Then she heard him come out of his room and walk back down the hall. He knocked on her door.

Pulling up in bed, she switched on the lamp on the nightstand and after pushing her hair away from her neck, she said, "Come in."

He opened the door and stood in the doorway looking handsome while staring at her. "Why aren't you in my bed?"

In his bed?

Myra frowned. Did he not see things weren't the same now? Why was he acting like they were? Before she realized what he was about to do, he entered the room and swept her into his arms.

"What do you think you're doing, Pete?"

"Taking you to my bedroom where you belong."

Where she belonged?

"But you don't want me there now."

"Don't know what gave you that idea," he said, leaving her bedroom and heading to his. He closed his door with the heel of his boot before placing her in the center of the bed. "We need to talk."

"You left when we were talking."

Sitting on the edge of the bed he rubbed his hand down his face. "I know and I apologize for that."

"I know what I told you repulsed you. I know it's hard to believe one sibling can harbor that much dislike for another one."

He reached out and took her hand. "You didn't repulse me and it's not hard to believe. As a police officer I've seen and heard things even more far-fetched."

"Then why did you leave like that?"

He drew in a deep breath. “Because listening to what you were saying reminded me of Ellen and how she died. At that moment, I was feeling like I’d let the both of you down.”

“Ellen? Your fiancée?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand. Why would you feel that way? Your fiancée died in a horse accident.”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t an accident but an intentional act by a guy she’d rebuffed for weeks.” He shared what had happened with Ellen.

“Oh, no!” Myra tightened her hand on his. “I am so sorry, Pete.”

He didn’t say anything for a minute and then he continued, “The hardest thing for me to accept was that she hadn’t told me anything about him. I had no idea her life had been threatened. That someone had targeted her. I felt as if I’d let her down in that she didn’t come to me. I now know why she did it. Mainly because she didn’t want me to get into any trouble. But still, as the woman I loved, I felt I should have known to protect her.”

Pete paused again. “Do you have any idea how I felt listening to you telling me about your brother? About how you’ve been hiding here, trying to keep a low profile so he wouldn’t find out where you were?”

“It’s not the same, Pete.”

He’d loved Ellen, but he didn’t love her. He might feel responsible for her since she was living in his house, but still, it wasn’t the same. Besides, Baron wouldn’t hurt her that way. He was ruthless, true, but he mainly wanted to scare her into staying away. He wouldn’t physically harm her.

“And why isn’t it the same, Myra?”

Why did he need her to spell it out for him? Okay, if she had to, then she would. “First of all, Ellen was your fiancée, the woman you loved. Second, she was murdered. Baron might be ruthless but he isn’t violent. The reason I was in hiding was

because I didn't want to be bothered with him until I was good and ready, which would have been after my birthday. The only reason Baron is looking for me is because he wants to know where I am at all times."

Pete shook his head. "No, it's a little more serious than that, Myra."

She lifted a brow. "What do you mean?"

"One of my detectives picked up that guy who'd been looking for you. Under interrogation, he revealed the plan your brother had in store for you."

"Plan? What plan?"

"It seems that one of his associates convinced Baron that he could keep the company beyond your twenty-fifth birthday if you signed everything over to him."

She shook her head. "I would not have done that."

"He intended to force you to do it."

"How? By blackmailing me with a video that he was going to get Rick to film? One of me in a compromising position? As if I'd let Rick get within ten feet of me again. Baron's wife, Cleo, overheard him making those plans with his friends and told me about them. That's when I left Charleston."

Pete lifted a brow. "Who's Rick?"

She released a deep breath. "My one mistake in life. He was older, worldly, a guy I thought I could fall in love with. He got rough with me and I didn't like it. When I tried to leave, he told me the only reason he was wasting his time with me was because my brother had encouraged him to seduce me."

Myra saw the way Pete's jaw tightened. "So that's why you had this thing against older men?"

"Yes. All Baron's friends were older and undesirable. And that's why I freaked out the night in your man cave when you inched your hand under my skirt. It reminded me of Rick." She paused and then asked, "So how was Baron supposed to get me to sign everything over to him, Pete?"

Pete didn't say anything for a minute, and then he said, "By having you kidnapped and taken to some private island in the Caribbean that's owned by someone his mother knows. They would have drugged you up enough to make you do anything. Even say you were happy there and never intended to return to the States."

Myra stared at Pete. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I wish I was. The guy we picked up, a friend of your brother's, doesn't relish any time in jail and has provided enough proof for us to bring in the FBI on attempted kidnapping charges. So far, the Feds have validated much of his claim, including the exchange of money, text conversations and where the island is located."

She shook her head, not wanting to believe that. "But that is ludicrous."

"Greed will make some people do unbelievable things, Myra."

She fought back tears at the thought that Baron would go that far. "I guess I was wrong about him." A tear she couldn't hold back fell down her cheek.

Pete reached up and gently swiped it off. "You were wrong about something else you said."

Mentally, she wasn't sure she could take much more. "What?"

"That the situation with you and the one with Ellen are different because I loved her. Well, I love you, too, Myra."

She blinked. "What did you say?"

"I said that I love you and as the woman I love, I would have done whatever I could to protect you. Now that I know what's going on, I am doing that. Your brother will not get away with anything."

She swallowed as she stared into his eyes. "You love me?"

"Yes, with all my heart. I honestly think I fell halfway in love with you the first time I saw you. That day you walked into my kitchen. I got pushed the rest of the way when I saw

how you interacted with Ciara and what a great job you were doing taking care of her. Taking care of me.”

“Oh, Pete, I love you, too. I truly do.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. When he finally released her mouth, he held her close. So close she could feel his heart beat against hers.

“I can’t imagine my life without you and didn’t want to tell you how I felt for fear you weren’t feeling the same way. But I had made up my mind to tell you tonight regardless and take my chances. Then I got the call about that man in town asking questions about you.”

He paused and then said, “I want a life with you. I want me, you, Ciara and any kids we have together to be a family. Will you marry me, Myra?”

Happiness exploded within her and, swiping at her tears, she said, “Yes! I will marry you, Pete.”

He pulled her back into his arms and held her, and at that moment she knew how it felt to love someone and feel their love in return. When he pulled back to look at her, she smiled up at him. “I love you so much, Pete.”

“And I love you, too.” He then pulled her back into his arms for another kiss.

Epilogue

“**Y**ou look absolutely beautiful, Myra.”

Myra smiled at the man who held her in his arms while they danced at the Westmoreland Charity Ball.

Last night, in this same ballroom, she and Pete had exchanged vows to become husband and wife. It had turned out to be the perfect plan since most of his friends had already arrived in town for the ball. Miss Bonnie had returned to town, as well. Wallace was the one who'd given her away. He and Pete had hit it off the moment they'd met. She and Pete would leave tomorrow on their honeymoon, a week in Honolulu. That was the longest they wanted to be away from Ciara.

“Thank you, and I think you look rather handsome yourself.”

He grinned at the compliment. “Are you happy?” he asked her.

“Immensely. Especially since that matter with my company has been resolved.”

The situation involving Baron had been more serious than Myra had known. It seemed the FBI already had Baron, Charlene and his cohorts under their radar. Baron's friend, the one he'd sent to grab her in Denver, had taken a plea deal. The man's confession and evidence had resulted in the arrests of Baron, Charlene and several of Baron's friends. The FBI had uncovered a number of their extortion schemes. It was also discovered that the island where they'd intended to take Myra was known as a depot for human trafficking.

Pete had accompanied her back to Charleston where she claimed total control of her company and then turned the head job over to Wallace, just like her father had wanted. Christmas morning had been wonderful, waking up to celebrate their birthdays together. Miss Bonnie had baked a huge chocolate cake for them. Later that day they had joined the Westmorelands for dinner at Dillon and Pam's home.

“That woman is absolutely gorgeous,” she said, looking over Pete’s shoulder.

“Who?”

“Garth Outlaw’s date.”

He chuckled. “Regan isn’t actually his date. They’ve known each other for years. She took over as his pilot when her father retired. I understand he’d been the Outlaws’ personal pilot for over forty years. And by the way, I happen to think you’re absolutely gorgeous, as well.”

She looked at him and smiled. “Thanks, sweetheart.” She then returned her attention back to the couple. Like them, Regan and Garth were on the dance floor. “That might be the case, but I still think they look good together. And I can’t get over how much Garth looks like Riley.”

Pete chuckled. “I know. Anyone who thinks the Westmorelands and Outlaws aren’t related just has to look at those two. Same thing with Dillon and Dare Westmoreland from Atlanta. Those are some strong Westmoreland genes.”

Myra had to agree. And regardless of what Pete said about Garth and his pilot, she could detect a romance brewing between those two, even if they couldn’t detect it themselves. She gazed back into her husband’s eyes and at that moment she knew that he was her joy and her happiness.

She had loved being the sheriff’s nanny and now she looked forward to forever being the sheriff’s wife.

* * * * *

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Tempting the Texan

by Maureen Child

Prologue

Kellan Blackwood was pissed.

His father, Buckley Blackwood, was dead and gone and yet the old man was still pulling strings. Only Buck could manage that from the grave.

Kel glanced at his brother and sister and silently admitted they didn't look any happier than he felt. Vaughn's intense green eyes were narrowed thoughtfully and he was half-sprawled in his chair. Sophie, their baby sister, wore black, and her long auburn hair was pulled back from her pretty face. Her brown eyes were teary, but she still looked as if she were torn between sorrow and anger.

Kel couldn't blame her. This wasn't easy on any of them, but there was no way to avoid what was coming. But at least they had each other to lean on. All three of them had had complicated "relationships" with their father. Buck had never been concerned with his kids or what they were doing. So the three of them, as children, had formed a tight bond that held strong today.

Kace LeBlanc, Buck's lawyer, walked into the office and stopped. "Kel," he said and nodded. "Vaughn. Sophie. Thanks for coming."

"Not like we had much choice, Kace." Vaughn sat up straight and tugged at the edges of his jacket.

"Right." Kace looked uncomfortable and Kel could understand it. As Buck's lawyer, Kace knew as well as they did that Buck hadn't given a good damn about his children—it was his businesses that had demanded his attention.

"Where's Miranda?" Kace glanced around the room as if expecting her to stand up from behind a chair.

“She hasn’t managed to come downstairs yet,” Kel explained, and his tone said exactly what he thought of the woman who had married and divorced his father.

Miranda Dupree was thirty-six years old. Same age as Kellan. A hell of a thing for your father to marry a woman the same age as his oldest child. But Buck had been a wealthy, lonely old man and she’d swooped in on his checkbook so fast, she’d been nothing but a redheaded blur. Sophie had given Miranda the nickname *Step-witch*, and Kel had to say it suited the grasping, greedy—

“Hello, everyone.”

Speak of the devil, Kel thought. He stood because his mother had drilled manners into him from the time he was a child. Then he surreptitiously slapped Vaughn’s shoulder to get him on his feet, as well. The one thing Kel couldn’t manage was making his voice sound welcoming. “Miranda. Surprised to see you back in Royal.”

The woman was beautiful, he’d give her that. Bright red hair, brilliant blue eyes and a figure that would bring some men—including his father—to their knees. But when Kel looked at her all he saw was the woman who’d driven another wedge between Buck and his family.

“Buck sent me a letter asking me to be here—along with a few other things.” Miranda gave him a slow smile that he was willing to bet she practiced in front of a mirror. “From what I hear, you’re not here all that often, either, Kellan. You live in Nashville now, don’t you?”

He gritted his teeth to keep what he wanted to say to the woman locked inside. There were plenty of reasons for his move to Nashville several years ago. And not one of them was any of Miranda’s business.

“Why are you even here?” Vaughn demanded. “Not like Buck’s alive enough for you to seduce again.”

“Like I said, Buck wanted me here,” she said simply and took a seat, smoothing her tight black skirt over her thighs.

Glancing over to Sophie and ignoring the men, she said, “I’m sorry about your father, Sophie.”

“I am, too,” she said and turned to look at Kace, in effect dismissing Miranda entirely.

“Can everyone just sit down?” Kace asked, his voice cool but clear.

“Yes,” Sophie said, tugging on Vaughn’s hand to get him back in his chair. “Come on, you guys, sit down and let’s get this over with.”

“Right,” Kel agreed. No point in dragging this out. He wanted to settle his business and get out of Royal fast enough that he wouldn’t run into—he cut that thought off because he couldn’t afford to think about *her*. Not now. Not ever.

He scrubbed one hand across his whiskered jaw and told himself that raking up the past wouldn’t serve anyone.

“Buck wanted all of you present to hear his will,” Kace said from behind Buckley’s desk. Instantly, Kel focused on the present.

“But it won’t take long.” Kace looked at each of them in turn, then zeroed in on Kellan. “I can give you all the legalese or just say it straight. Which do you want?”

Kel gave his siblings a quick look and nodded. They were clearly of a mind with him. He didn’t give a damn what Miranda wanted. So he said, “Just say it, Kace.”

Sympathy shone briefly in Kace’s eyes and Kel knew he wasn’t going to like whatever was coming before the man even said, “Basically, Buck left everything to Miranda.”

“*What?*” Kellan was up and out of his chair in a blink. Vaughn was just a second or two behind him, and Sophie... Well, she sat there looking stunned as if she’d hit her head.

“You can’t be serious.” Kel glared at Kace.

“Yeah, I am.” Kace didn’t look happy about this. “He knew what he wanted and he laid it all out pretty clearly. And before you ask, your dad was of sound mind, Kellan,” Kace said.

“You call this ‘sound mind’?”

“Legally, yeah,” Kace said. “I know this is hard—”

It was unthinkable. Buckley Blackwood hadn’t been much of a father, but damned if Kellan could understand the old man leaving the family ranch to his ex-wife instead of his children. Slowly, he swiveled his head to stare at her. She didn’t look surprised at all. Now, why was that? Had Kace told her what to expect? Had Buck?

“What the hell, Miranda?”

She shrugged and gave him that smile again. “I don’t know why he did it, Kellan. All I know is he had a letter delivered to me after his death, telling me to be here for the will reading.” She shrugged. “Your father was a generous man.”

Not how Kellan remembered him.

“You know what? I didn’t want his money or his property anyway,” Vaughn said. “I don’t need anything from him at this point. But there is no way Dad would do this,” Vaughn argued, glaring at their ex-stepmother.

“Yeah, well, he did,” Kace said simply.

“He must have hated us,” Sophie whispered.

“No,” Kellan assured her. “He didn’t.” Hell, Buck hadn’t noticed any of them enough to instill any real emotion—love or hate. Besides, no one could hate Sophie. “I don’t know what the hell is going on,” he said, giving Kace a hard glare before turning to Miranda. “But I will find out. For now, all I’ll say is this isn’t over.”

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Duty or Desire

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