

A muscular man with a beard and a black cowboy hat is the central figure. He is shirtless, showing his well-defined chest and arms. He is holding the brim of his hat with both hands, looking off to the side. The background features a wooden barn on the left and a range of snow-capped mountains under a clear sky. The overall scene is set in a rural, mountainous area.

He wanted her the minute
he saw her, but she was
cautious. What was she
hiding, and could he
help her move past it?

WESTON

MEN OF CLIFTON MONTANA BOOK 33

Bestselling Author

SUSAN FISHER-DAVIS

WESTON

Susan Fisher-Davis

Men of Clifton, Montana

Book 33

Weston Men of Clifton, Montana Book 33

Copyright © 2023 Susan Fisher-Davis

First eBook Publication: November 2023

Cover: The Killian Group Images

Cover Artist: Untold Designs Romance and Fantasy Covers

All cover art copyright © 2023 by Susan Davis

Edited by: KDL Editing & Proofing

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER: Blue Whiskey Publishing

[Susan Fisher-Davis, Romance Author - Home \(weebly.com\)](http://www.susanfisherdavis.com)

Acknowledgments

To my husband, Rob—you *are* my cowboy.

To the ladies in my Facebook group: Susan's Hot Cowboys
—you all know how to make my day.

To my betas: Renee and Alison. I appreciate you so much.

To my fantastic PA: Ashley Martinez. Thank you for all
you do.

As always to you, my readers.

I wouldn't be able to do this without you. I love every one
of you,

and I appreciate your support.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More Books by Susan](#)

Chapter One

Weston Coleman swore when another cow bolted from the herd. It was too damn hot to be out here. He just wanted to get home and take a cold shower. There was sweat in places he didn't even want to think about. He sighed, nudged the horse, and galloped after the cow.

After rounding up the cattle, they were loaded into a hauler. Wes signed the receipt, shook hands with the driver, and watched the truck drive away. He walked to his horse, picked up the reins, and led it into the barn to cool it down.

As he put the horse in its stall, his cellphone buzzed, and he removed it from his pocket. He saw his brother's number and answered.

"Hey, Warren. What's up?"

"Did the hauler get there?"

"Yeah, he just pulled out. Why?"

"Just wondering. They called to say he was running late."

"Only about a half hour."

"Okay. Hey, want to go to dinner at the diner tonight?"

"You buying?" Wes grinned when his brother laughed.

"No. You are little brother. What time will you finish?"

"I'm heading home now. I'll pick you up at six. Will that work for you?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then." Warren disconnected.

At six, Wes stopped at his brother's house and tapped the horn. He saw the back door open, and Warren stepped out. He closed the door, jogged down the steps, and climbed into the cab.

"Hey."

"Hey. I'm starving." Warren clicked the seatbelt.

“Me too. I didn’t eat at all today.”

“Wes, you can’t be doing that, especially in this heat. I hope you’re drinking enough water and Gatorade.”

“Of course, but with all the dust and dirt blowing around, trying to eat a sandwich in that wasn’t appealing at all,” Wes said.

Warren chuckled. “Been there.”

Wes pulled the truck into the diner’s parking lot, and they stepped out, then entered the restaurant. They waved at some patrons, then sat at the counter.

Wes picked up a menu, sighed, and put it back down. He grinned when Warren laughed.

“You do it every time.”

“I know. I think I might want to try something different, but those damn burgers are too hard to resist.”

“I’ve had about everything in here, but anytime I’m here, I have to have a burger.” Warren grinned.

Wes nodded and looked at the door when it opened, and a beautiful woman entered. She was slender with dark hair, and when she got closer, he could see her eyes were dark brown, and she was beautiful. Her eyes met his, but she quickly glanced away.

He watched her walk to a booth. Her hair was in a long braid that fell to the middle of her back, and her jeans hugged her ass. He shook his head. It had been a while since a woman interested him so fast. He watched as she slid onto the seat with her back to the door.

“Who is she?” Warren asked him.

“I have no clue. She could be a tourist.”

“Yeah, that’s true. She’s pretty.”

“Beautiful,” Wes murmured.

“Don’t you even think about it.”

“About what?” Wes looked at Warren.

“Going after her. She probably *is* a tourist, and she’ll leave.”

“And that’s a problem... how?”

Warren huffed a laugh. “I guess it isn’t if you’re just in it for sex.”

“Hell, when am I in it for anything else?”

“You’re going to have to settle down one day.”

“Why? You haven’t, and you’re older.”

“By two damn years, Wes. Not a big difference.”

“Still. If you’re going to harp on me about settling down, maybe I should do the same to you.”

“I’m well aware I should too, but I haven’t found anyone. I want to because I want to make sure the ranch keeps going.”

“Me too.”

“Hello, boys. What can I get you?” Connie asked them.

“My usual, please,” Warren said.

“Same here, Connie.”

“It’s good to see you two together. You don’t get in here together very often.”

“It’s a big ranch, Connie. We go for weeks without seeing each other. I’m too busy running the herds, and Warren is busy with the business side of it.”

“Family should make time. Your orders will be right up.” She set mugs on the counter and poured coffee into them, then gave their orders to Owen.

Wes watched her pick up a pitcher of ice water and walk to the woman in the booth. He saw Connie pour water into a glass, then took the woman’s order. He watched them talking and Connie laughing at something the woman said.

When Connie brought their lunches, Wes had to ask.

“Connie? Do you know that woman in the booth?”

“Yes. Shay Rogers. She moved here a few months ago. She owns A Touch of Glass. You’re slipping, Weston, if you’re just now seeing her.” Connie grinned.

Wes laughed and shook his head. “I must be.”

“Where did she move here from?” Warren asked as he picked up his burger and took a bite.

“New York City.”

Wes and Warren looked at each other and grinned.

“City girl,” they said in unison, making Connie laugh.

“I suppose she is, but she is as sweet as can be. Seems a little lost, though.”

“Oh, hell. I’m not touching that one,” Wes said, and Warren laughed.

“That’s probably best. If she has baggage, it’s hard to tell what you’ll get into,” Warren said.

“I know.” Wes glanced back to the booth but couldn’t see her.

He picked up his burger and took a bite, then groaned.

“Connie, I want to marry you.”

“I’ll have to see if Owen will divorce me.” Connie winked.

“The man is too smart for that,” Wes said.

“He’d better be. You two let me know if you need anything.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wes smiled.

When the bell over the door jingled, he glanced over to see Hank Barnett enter, and he got to his feet.

“Hank, how are you? I haven’t seen you in a while,” Wes said as he shook the man’s hand.

“I’m good, Wes. You? Hey, Warren. Nice to see you too.”

“Same. Would you like to join us?” Warren asked him.

“No, thanks. I’m meeting with Ash. Some other time, though.” Hank grinned.

“Sounds good. You’re still growing wheat for him, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. We’re just going over numbers.”

“How’s Marlowe?” Wes asked.

Hank grinned. “Wonderful. Best thing to happen to me.”

“We’re glad to hear that.”

“I missed you at the wedding.”

“We were on a cattle drive. I’m sorry we missed it,” Wes said.

“Me too. Well, I’d better find a seat.” Hank grinned.

“Okay, enjoy your dinner.” Wes grinned and resumed his seat.

“Same to you guys.” Hank walked off and sat in a booth.

“Hank seems happy,” Warren said as he picked up his coffee mug.

“It surprised me when he got married after what he went through.”

“That was years ago, and Marlowe got him past it. She’s good for him.” Warren bit into his burger.

“Yeah, she sure is. I wonder if we’re ever going to find someone.” Wes looked at the booth where Shay sat.

“I know. I’m too close to forty and I’m not getting any younger.”

“I’m not far behind you.” Wes shook his head.

“Yeah, we need to get busy or there won’t be anyone to keep the ranch going.”

“We can’t allow that to happen,” Wes said.

“It’s not that easy, Wes. We’d have to find someone first. I know how disappointed Dad would be if the ranch didn’t continue. It’s been in his family for generations.”

Wes nodded but said nothing. He knew his brother was right. They spent so much time on the ranch that they didn't have time for a relationship, but they had to make time or lose the ranch.

Warren was thirty-nine and Wes was thirty-seven. It wasn't like they were old, but if they didn't do something soon, life would pass them by. Who wanted to have kids when they couldn't enjoy them? Wes wanted to have kids so he could teach them the ways of the ranch, and he knew Warren felt the same.

They'd grown up on the ranch, and their father taught them the running of it. When he retired, he knew the ranch would be in good hands, but who were they supposed to hand it down to if they didn't find someone? He huffed and placed his burger on his plate. He'd lost his appetite.

"I thought you were hungry?"

"I was." Wes tossed his napkin onto his plate.

"Yeah, I get it." Warren waved Connie over.

"Dessert?" Connie asked them.

"No, thanks, Connie. Just the check. Give it to Wes," Warren said with a grin.

Connie chuckled. "I'll be right back."

"I don't know how you think it's my turn. It's been so long since we had lunch together."

"My memory is better than yours."

Wes laughed. "Only when it suits you."

"True." Warren stood. "Let's get out of here. I still have some buyers to call."

"Okay." Wes got up and glanced around. He watched Shay Rogers slide from the booth and walk their way.

"How was your lunch, Shay?" Connie asked as she placed the check on the counter in front of Wes.

"It was wonderful, Connie. As usual."

Wes gritted his teeth at hearing that soft, sexy voice. He could smell her light perfume and he wanted to bury his face in her neck. She was beautiful and he'd love to know her, but when her eyes met his, she looked away again.

"Connie tells us you own the glass shop?" Warren asked, making Wes look at him with a frown.

Shay smiled at him. "I do. A Touch of Glass features handblown items."

"Do you do that?"

"I wish. I don't have that kind of talent. My uncle does it. It's actually his gallery."

"Well, we'll have to stop in. I'm Warren Coleman, and this is my brother, Weston." Warren put his hand out to her, and she shook it then looked at Wes.

"Wes, please." He smiled as he shook her hand and watched as a blush moved into her cheeks.

"I'm Shaylyn Rogers, but everyone calls me Shay. It's nice to meet you both." She turned to pay Connie and Wes glared at Warren, who grinned, and shrugged.

After she paid, Shay smiled, and walked out of the diner. Wes paid Connie, then they walked outside.

"What the hell was that about?" Wes asked.

"What? I was just being polite."

"Polite, my ass. If you're so interested in finding someone, maybe you should ask her out."

"I'm not interested in her. You're the one who couldn't keep your eyes off her. Hell, go for it."

"I don't know, Warren. If she has baggage, there is no way I want to get involved."

"You won't know unless you ask. She is a beautiful woman, Wes, and we all have things in life to get through. Maybe that's why she's here."

"Maybe. I'll think about it."

“It’s all you can do. You know, Mom’s birthday is coming up. Maybe you should buy her a handblown vase or something.”

Wes grinned. “I could do that.”

Warren laughed, then they walked to the truck, climbed into the cab and Wes drove them home.

He stopped the vehicle in front of Warren’s home and looked over at him.

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sure. I’ll be in the office if you need anything.”

“Okay. Oh, hey, are you going on the cattle drive this year?”

“I’ve thought about it, but I’m not sure. I have a lot to do.”

“You need time away from the office, Warren. You used to love to go.”

“Yeah, but since I took over the business side, I don’t get a lot of free time.”

“Make time. It would be good for you to get out of the office. Even Dad tells you that.”

“I know. I’ll think about it.” Warren stepped from the truck. “Maybe get to know Shay Rogers and take her with you.”

Wes laughed. “I doubt if she’d go. She’s a city girl.”

“Only one way to find out. Talk soon.” Warren shoved the door closed, walked up the steps, and entered the house.

Wes sighed and drove home. With a hundred thousand acres, they didn’t live close to each other. Warren’s home sat on the west side of the property, and Wes’s sat on the east side. They rarely saw each other.

Wes took care of the cattle side of the ranch, and Warren ran the business side. It was a perfect combination that worked. Their parents lived on the south section of the ranch. Wes grinned as he thought about their parents. They were the best and he was happy their father retired from the business

and entrusted his sons to run the Triple C. They hadn't let him down. It had prospered tremendously under them.

He hoped Warren never wanted to trade jobs because Wes knew he'd never be able to deal with the business side of it as well. Warren had more education and experience, and Wes was fine with it. He preferred to be outdoors. That didn't mean that Warren didn't, he just had more to contend with.

Although both men had degrees in animal husbandry, Warren also had a business degree, along with one in agriculture. He knew the business side of running a ranch.

With only two years between them, they'd always been close growing up. Wes knew Warren had his back and it was mutual.

They were the last two Coleman's in the family with any hope of keeping the ranch going. If they didn't get married and have kids to pass it down to, it would die with them.

He shook his head. They couldn't let that happen. They weren't old men, by any means, but time would pass them by if they didn't do something soon.

A week later, Shay entered the shop, flipped on the lights, and turned the sign on the door over to 'Open' then made her way to the back to store her purse in the safe.

After making a cup of coffee, she walked into the showroom and glanced around. She loved having her own shop.

Her uncle Lou was a well-known glass artist. He designed projects, glassblowing, and decorating glass objects, involving blowing, shaping, joining, and staining pieces to create art. He worked with molten glass using ovens, kilns, and necessary tools and equipment. He also decorated premade glass objects by painting or etching them. Shay had even watched him create stained glass windows, vessels, and other pieces of art.

His skills were in high demand, and as much as she would love to learn the art of it, she never had.

When Shay had to leave New York, her uncle told her about Clifton, Montana. He had been through the town on his way to Washington from North Dakota. He happened to see the sign for the small town and decided to make a stop. He loved it so much that he opened the shop and asked her to run it. She knew he did it to protect her, but she'd take all the help she could get.

Lou Rogers was all she had in this world as far as family. Her father was his brother, and Shay had always been close to him since her mother had left after she was born.

When her father died in a car accident four years ago, Lou helped her through it even though he was in pain too.

He also helped her through a bad time with her ex. She shivered as she thought of Lyle Newman finding her. He wasn't physically abusive, just controlling and she was so done with it. She also knew, with all her heart, that he would be looking for her. He'd never stop until he found her and tried to intimidate her to return to New York with him. Never again.

Shaking her head, she walked along the displays, rearranging some of them. The shop did extremely well in the summer months due to tourism. It had shocked her that the little town was packed with tourists and found that most of them were visiting and staying at the Clifton Bed and Breakfast or the Bur Oak guest ranch in Spring City, the little town next to Clifton. On the other side, was Hartland. The communities were tightly woven, and Shay absolutely loved it.

She never thought she'd move from New York, but she had no choice. She had to get away from Lyle and his controlling ways.

He had to be pissed when he discovered she'd left. She packed her things and walked out one day while he went on a business trip. It was the only chance she had to leave. He called her so much that she changed her number. She hoped she would never see him again, but in the back of her mind, she knew she would. Some people didn't understand how

much domestic abuse happened because many women were too afraid to report it. Whether physical or mental, being in a relationship that terrified you was debilitating.

When the bell jingled, announcing a customer, she turned to see several women enter, and she knew, without a doubt, they were tourists.

“Hi, welcome to A Touch of Glass. Feel free to look around, and if you have questions, please ask.”

The women smiled at her, then moved around the store. Soon, Shay was ringing up their orders.

“Are you ladies here on vacation?”

“Does it show?” one of them answered with a laugh.

Shay grinned. “A little, but we are happy to have you in Clifton. Where are you staying?”

“We have a cabin at the Clifton B and B. We tried to get a room, but they were booked solid. The woman we spoke with said they had a cancellation on a cabin, and if we were interested, it was ours. As you can see, we were interested.”

Shay laughed. “I hope you’re enjoying your stay.”

“I am in love with this town,” another one said.

“I moved here six months ago and can’t see leaving.”

“I hate the idea of going.” The woman sighed.

“You’d be surprised at the amount of people who move here after one visit.” Shay smiled.

“I don’t think it surprises me one bit. I would move here in a heartbeat.”

“Hey, after seeing all those hot, gorgeous cowboys at the diner eating breakfast this morning, I’m looking for an apartment.” The women laughed.

When the bell chimed, they all looked to the door, and Shay heard the women gasp. She knew how they felt as she watched Rand Morris enter.

“Good morning,” he said as he touched the brim of his hat.

“Good morning, Rand. Can I help you find something?” Shay asked.

“I’m not sure yet, Shay. Everly told me about a vase she liked. She said it was blue.” He glanced around, then back at her, and shrugged.

Shay laughed. “Blue? Well, that certainly narrows it down.”

Rand chuckled. “Right?”

Shay nodded. “Let me know if you need help.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He walked through the store, and the women didn’t take their eyes off him.

“Oh, yeah. I want to move here. I don’t know who Everly is, but I hate her.” The woman laughed.

“Everly is his wife,” Shay said.

“Yep. Hate her.”

Shay shook her head, but she knew they were right. Rand Morris was one hot cowboy, and it was too bad he was married, but he loved Everly and their daughter. Shay knew in her heart he would never stray. Not that she would get involved with a married man. She just knew Rand wouldn’t hurt Everly. No. Any man involved with anyone was off the books for her. She’d never want someone who cheated.

Rand left after buying a blue vase a while later, and then the women filed out. She knew as the day went on, she’d get much busier. She had no complaints about that but should hire someone to help. In the summer, it was too much for one person.

With a sigh, she knew it was time to add an employee. She’d ask around and advertise on the internet. She wasn’t sure what else to do on that matter.

“Talk to Connie. That woman knows everyone,” Shay muttered.

She left the shop at lunchtime, locked it behind her, and walked to the diner. Everyone she passed smiled or said hello.

She stopped when she had an uneasy feeling, and quickly glanced around. She didn't see anything, but she had a feeling, it was Lyle. She hurried along the sidewalk.

She opened the door to the diner, making the bell jingle, and everyone looked at the door. She smiled when most waved or called out to her. What a great town.

She sat at the counter, picked up a menu, and scanned it. It was so hot today that she didn't want a burger.

“Hi, Shay. What can I get you?”

Shay glanced up to see Deidra Mitchell and smiled.

“I'm not sure. As much as I love the burgers, it's too hot.”

“We eat hot food no matter the weather, Shay,” Deidra said with a smile.

“True, but I don't want a burger...” She nibbled her lip as she looked at the menu.

“How about a southern fried chicken salad?”

“Oh, that sounds good.” Shay closed the menu and stuck it behind the napkin holder. “I'll have that, with Ranch dressing, and water is fine.”

“Great. I'll be right back with it.”

“Thanks, Deidra.” Shay glanced around the restaurant.

When the bell jingled, she jumped thinking it could be Lyle, but saw Weston Coleman enter. That man was very handsome. More than handsome. Hot. Sexy. Gorgeous. Man. Cowboy. She nibbled her bottom lip as she toyed with the napkin holder. Did he remember her? It had been a week.

“For God's sake. Do you think he has no memory?” she murmured.

“I'm sorry?” Deidra frowned at her as she refilled her water glass.

“Talking to myself.”

Deidra nodded. “Been there and even more so since being with Preston.”

Shay laughed. "I can believe that. Men."

Deidra grinned. "So true."

Shay picked up her glass and sipped from it as she discreetly watched Weston talking with another man. After shaking the man's hand, he turned, and their eyes met. She quickly looked away.

"Ms. Rogers," he said.

Shay took a deep breath and turned to look at him. Her breath lodged in her throat. His dark hair on the nape of his neck was wet with sweat, and she had the absurd desire to run her fingers through the thick strands. She noticed a few gray hairs at his temples and sideburns. His eyes, surrounded by thick lashes, were green with a black circle on the outer edge of the iris, known as a limbal ring. They were beautiful. His strong jaw was covered in scruff and surrounded a very sexy pair of lips that she had no doubt, he knew how to use on a woman.

"Hello, Mr. Coleman."

"Wes, please."

"Please call me Shay."

"Thanks, I will. Enjoy your lunch," he said, then walked off.

Damn, he was hot.

"You do not need the hassle," she muttered.

"Here you go, Shay. Enjoy your lunch. If you need me, wave me down." Deidra smiled, then moved on to another patron.

Shay watched Wes Coleman slide into a booth. But when he looked her way again, she quickly shifted her eyes from him. She was on fire any time she looked into his eyes. She'd never felt an attraction so fast.

A few minutes later, she heard Connie laughing and glanced over her shoulder to see her at his booth. She'd love to know more about him, but he could be married or involved

with someone. She looked at his left hand but didn't see a wedding band. That didn't mean a thing. Some men didn't wear one.

It didn't matter. A man was the last thing she needed right now. Lyle had done such a number on her that the thought of going through it again with any man was not an option. She sighed as she glanced at Wes Coleman again. It would never happen. She picked up her fork and dug into her salad.

When Connie refilled her water, Shay smiled.

"Connie? Do you know anyone who's looking for a job?"

"Not off-hand, but I'll ask around. Do you want to hire?"

"I do. I didn't realize I'd be this busy. Winter wasn't like this, but this time of the year is crazy."

"This is your first summer here, isn't it?"

"Yes. I moved here the end of December."

"The tourism here is great from March until October."

"I love it, though. I'm glad I moved here." Shay smiled.

"We're glad you did, too. I can ask around for you. Place a Help Wanted sign in your window and put flyers out. You can put some here." Connie winked and moved to another customer.

Shay smiled. She was so happy that she moved here. No one in this town treated her as a stranger. The minute everyone discovered she lived here, they took her in as one of their own.

As she ate her salad, she looked out the window to see people passing by. A few came inside. The little diner was always busy. The first time she came in to eat, she'd been so self-conscious because everyone stared at her until she sat at the counter. Connie had been wonderful to her from the start, and once she found out that Shay had moved to Clifton, Connie began introducing her to everyone.

Shay hoped she could stay and not worry about Lyle finding her and making her life even more miserable than he

already had. He thought he owned her, and she knew he had to be angry at her for disappearing.

While packing her clothes, she feared he would come home and catch her. Her gut had been in knots that day. He would have gone off in a second. She'd never forget telling her uncle about how Lyle treated her. He loved to belittle her and tell her she was nothing without him. He hated any man who even looked at her.

Once, when they had broken up, she started dating another man until Lyle found out and threatened him. When it happened again, she told her uncle, and he came up with the idea of her moving to Clifton. He told her he felt she would love the little town, and he'd been right.

Shay wasn't sure how Lyle would ever find her, but she also knew he'd never give up until he did.

After finishing her lunch, she paid the bill, walked outside, and returned to her store. She unlocked the door, removed the 'Out to lunch' sign, and returned her purse to the safe.

While she waited for customers, she made up a sign for help and stuck it in the window. As she walked back to the counter, the door opened, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Wes Coleman enter, and she sucked in a breath at how good-looking he truly was. His brother had been just as handsome, but something about Wes Coleman caught her attention.

"Hi," she said with a smile.

He touched the brim of his hat, and she almost sighed.

"Ma'am. I see you're hiring."

Shay tilted her head. "Are you looking for a job?"

When he grinned, she was sure she melted into a puddle at the man's feet.

"No. I have enough on my plate. If that's all right with you, I'll look around for a gift."

"Of course." She wondered who he was buying something for.

He nodded, then walked around the shop. She had trouble keeping her eyes off him. His blue T-shirt hugged his pecs and flat stomach, and the sleeves were tight around his biceps. His arms were amazing. Lord, she was on fire.

She ran her eyes down his chest to the buckle on his belt and below. Who knew a man could fill out a pair of Wranglers so well? They were snug in all the right places, and she couldn't take her eyes off his crotch.

With a sigh, she moved her eyes along his legs and smiled when she saw the worn cowboy boots. She had never been into cowboys, but this one had her quickly wondering why the hell not. She'd love to know if he was married. He didn't wear a band, but some men who worked outdoors or around equipment didn't. *Who was he buying a gift for?*

Shay moved behind the counter and kept her eyes on him until the door opened and more customers entered. The women smiled at her, then glanced around, and Shay almost laughed when she saw them eyeing Wes. Who could blame them? The man was the essential cowboy.

He picked up a glass cat in shades of white, green, and blue, then walked to the counter and set it down.

"I'll take this." He reached for his wallet.

"Would you like it gift-wrapped?"

"That would be great. Thank you."

"Sure. Just give me a minute. Ladies, I'll be right with you," she said, then headed to the back to wrap the gift.

As she placed it on the paper, she smiled when she heard the women talking with him. She finished with it, walked out to the storefront, and put it inside a blue bag with A Touch of Glass scrolled in white.

"Here you go, Mr. Coleman."

"I thought I asked you to call me Wes?"

The heat poured into her cheeks as she looked at him.

"You did." She smiled and sighed when he grinned at her.

“So... *Wes*, what is it you do?” one woman asked him.

“I’m a rancher, ma’am, along with my brother.”

“Is he as good-looking as you?” another asked, and the women laughed when Wes shook his head and blew out a laugh.

“Some say better.” He chuckled.

“I find that hard to believe. Is he single?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Are you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I just might have to move here.”

Wes laughed as he handed Shay his credit card. She took it from him, ran it, and had him sign the receipt. He waved away a copy and put the card back inside his wallet, picked up the bag, and after touching the brim of his hat, he looked at Shay.

“Maybe I’ll see you again, Shay. Have a nice day.” He opened the door and stepped out.

Shay glanced around, and all the women were staring in the direction he’d gone.

“Wow,” one of them said, and then she looked at Shay. “If you’re single, you need to go after that man. My God, he is gorgeous.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Do you know his brother?”

“Yes. Warren is very handsome, too.”

“I’m sure Warren is sexy, too, if his brother is anything to go by.”

Shay laughed and then helped them with questions they had. Once they left, she walked to the door and peered outside. The heat rose from the street like invisible flames, and little bubbles popped up on the blacktop.

She hoped the heat would dissipate soon. It was too hot to even walk to the apartment complex. She hated living there, but finding a place was hard, though she knew she would keep looking.

After getting new items from the storeroom, she placed them around the showroom and turned toward the door when it opened again. A woman entered and smiled at her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hello. Welcome to A Touch of Glass. Can I help you find something?”

“I’m just looking. I’m not sure what I want.”

“Take your time. I’m Shay Rogers. I run the gallery.”

“Hi, Shay. I’m JoJo Flynn. I work across the street at the bakery.”

“Oh, God! The smells coming from there. I could gain ten pounds just by the smells alone between that place and the diner.”

“Tell me about it.” JoJo laughed.

“Have you always lived here, JoJo?”

“Yes. Born and raised. Where are you from?”

“New York City.”

“You’re a long way from home.”

“This is my home now.” Shay smiled.

“Well, welcome to the friendliest town in the west.”

“Thank you. Since you’ve lived here, could you tell me if there is another apartment complex?”

“There’s only one. I lived there for a while but moved in with my fiancée.”

“Lucky you. The neighbors are so loud.”

“Hey, ask Connie. There’s an apartment above the diner she rents. My sister-in-law lived there before she married my brother.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll ask her this evening. I plan to have dinner there. I can’t get enough of those burgers.”

“I know what you mean. My fiancée moved here from Helena and fell in love with the area and the diner.” JoJo picked up a vase.

“And you,” Shay said with a smile.

“Yes.” JoJo beamed a smile at her. “I really like this. Are all these hand-blown?”

“Yes. My uncle makes them. He’s a very well-known glassmith.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“Thank you. I know he’d appreciate that.”

“Is there a way to tell if it’s not hand-blown?”

“A hand-blown piece of art glass will always have a pontil, even if it is polished on the bottom.”

“A pontil?”

“A pontil mark or punt mark is the scar where the pontil, punty, or punt was broken from a blown glass of work. If there is a scar, the bottle or bowl was blown by hand, and no punt mark means it was mold-blown or the mark was removed. The pontil mark is made from the rod the glass is attached to as it’s blown.”

“Unreal. Do you know how to do it?”

“No. I wanted to learn, but I didn’t have the patience. It’s amazing to watch, though.”

“I bet. I’ll take this. It’s so pretty.” JoJo held up a clear vase with blue swirling through it.

“If there is anything you’re looking for that I don’t have, he will do special orders.”

“I’ll that.”

After JoJo paid for her item and left, Shay sat on the stool behind the counter and smiled as she watched people passing

by. A few came in, and she sold more pieces but was happy for the quiet.

At six, she closed the door behind her and locked it, then walked to the diner. She wanted to get a burger, but she also wanted to talk to Connie about the apartment. If someone lived in it, she'd deal with it, but she was hoping it was available. It had to be quieter than where she lived now.

Chapter Two

Wes sat at the counter and glanced at the door when it opened, and Shay Rogers entered. He couldn't help but stare at her. She was beautiful. Her long, dark hair was in a bun today, accentuating her neck. He wanted to bury his face there and inhale her scent. He was sure she smelled amazing. Once again, she quickly glanced away when she saw him.

It had been a while since he'd been this interested in a woman. Sure, he'd see one for sex, but this was different. He wanted to *know* her, but he was better off not getting involved if she carried baggage.

"Hi, Wes," Deidra said as she filled his water glass.

"Hey, Deidra. How are you and Preston doing?" Wes picked up the glass and sipped.

"We're great. How about you?"

"Good. Thanks for asking."

"You gave Aunt Connie your order, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay. I'll be back around." She smiled and walked to the next customer.

Wes watched Deidra smiling as she filled glasses. Preston Mitchell was one lucky man. Deidra was beautiful, with her dark hair and green eyes. So were her sisters and cousin, and all were in happy relationships.

"Late again, Coleman," he muttered. He looked at Shay. "Hello again."

"Hi. Did your gift go over well?"

"I haven't given it to her yet. Her birthday is in two days."

"Oh, I see. Well, I hope she likes it. Enjoy your dinner."

"Thanks. You too."

“Hi, Shay. I’ll be right with you.” Deidra smiled.

“No worries. Is Connie around? I’d like to talk to her if she has a minute.”

“She’s in the kitchen. Take a seat, and I’ll let her know.”

“Thanks, Deidra.” Shay walked to a booth and sat.

Wes kept his eyes on her until she slid into the booth with her back to him. He’d like to ask her out, but something in her eyes told him she’d been through a lot. In his opinion, in those cases, it was best to stay as far away as possible.

He sighed as he looked her way again, then picked up his glass and drank. He watched Connie come from the kitchen and walk to him with his meal. She set it on the counter, smiled, and walked to where Shay sat. Wes watched as Connie slid into the booth across from Shay.

They chatted for a while. Wes grinned when he heard them laughing. Few people in Clifton were loved as much as Connie and Owen. They never had children, but the entire town was their family. There wasn’t anything they wouldn’t do for someone who needed help.

He glanced at them again to see Connie getting up and entering the kitchen. She returned within a minute and laid something on the table that Shay picked up, and then Connie reentered the kitchen.

After he finished his meal, he stood, removed his wallet, and paid for his dinner.

“You come back, Weston,” Connie said.

“You know I will, Connie.”

“Shay, are you ready too?”

“I am. Connie, I can’t thank you enough.”

“No need. It’s empty. I like someone living upstairs.”

Wes looked at Shay.

“Are you moving into the apartment above the diner?”

“Yes. I can’t wait to see it.”

“You just be careful. It’s dark back there. Wes, maybe you should go with her.”

“Uh...”

“No, it’s fine.”

“The streetlight is blown out back there. I know it’s not pitch black, but it is dark. Please, Wes. Walk her around. Someone is supposed to repair it tomorrow.”

Wes shrugged. “Sure. It’s no problem, Shay. You don’t want to walk into a dark alley alone.” He sighed when she nodded.

He waited while she paid for her meal, held the door for, and followed her out. They walked through the parking lot to the back of the diner and the metal steps.

“It is very dark back here,” Shay said. She removed her phone from her pocket and turned the flashlight on.

“Yes, even though the sun is shining out front, the buildings block the sun back here, but the light should be fixed tomorrow, and you won’t have to worry about it.”

She nodded, held the rail, and climbed the steps to the stoop. Wes was thankful it was dark because he knew he’d be staring at her ass as he followed her if he could see it. He grinned because, in his mind, he *could* see it. It was imprinted on his brain.

They climbed the stairs, and she inserted the key into the lock when they reached the stoop. She pushed the door open and stepped inside. Wes watched her shine the light around until she found a wall switch and flipped it. The room lit up, and he heard her gasp.

“It’s so cute,” she said as she entered the living room.

Wes glanced around and thought it was a nice apartment. A bar separated the kitchen from the small living room, which was furnished.

“Did you know it would be furnished?”

“Connie mentioned it. My furniture needs to be replaced, anyway. I really like this,” she said as she gazed around the room. Then she walked down a hallway, and Wes followed.

“How many bedrooms?”

“Two with one bath. She said I’d love the bathroom.” Shay laughed. “Not sure why, but I’m going to look.”

She pushed a door open, flipped on the light, and laughed.

“What is it?”

“A huge clawfoot tub. I don’t know any woman who wouldn’t love to soak in that. I can’t wait to move here.”

Wes looked over her shoulder to see the tub, and he grinned. His parents had a tub like this in their master bathroom, and his mother loved it. When Shay moved out of the bathroom, she bumped into him, and he grasped her arms.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t see—” She stared into his eyes, and he glanced at her lips and then back into her eyes.

“I have to taste those lips,” he murmured before pressing his lips to hers.

When she moaned, he pulled her tight against him, and her arms wrapped around his neck as she leaned into him.

Oh, this was wrong. So very wrong. Shay sighed as he moved his lips over hers, and she wanted to drag him to the floor. She’d never been turned on so fast that she couldn’t seem to get close enough to him. She removed his hat and tossed it to the floor.

When his hands moved down to her waist, and then around to her butt, she gulped in air until his fingers gripped her and made her moan. She could feel the length of his hard cock pressed against her stomach. Her hands journeyed down his chest to the buckle of his belt before unhooking it and sliding open the zipper of his jeans. Taking him in her hand, she

squeezed tight and pumped along his length, eliciting a growl from him.

Pulling back from their kiss, Shay kissed along his whiskered jawline to his ear and took the lobe between her teeth.

“Shay, I want you,” he breathed into her ear, sending shivers up and down her spine.

“I want you too,” she replied softly. “Wes?”

“Yeah?”

“Who was the gift for?”

“My mom. Why?”

“I just wanted to make sure you weren’t involved with anyone.”

“I’m not. Are you?”

“No.”

“Well, then can I get back to it?”

“Please.”

Wes pulled her shirt off and tossed it aside. Shay watched him taking in her lacy bra with an admiring gaze. He slowly unhooked it and let the straps slide down her arms as he removed it. His hands cupped her breasts, then moved lower and worked on the snap of her jeans as he opened them and reached inside. She toed off her sneakers.

He dropped to his knees, placed his lips over her nipple, and sucked it deep into his mouth. She dug her fingers into his hair as he switched to her other nipple. He pushed her jeans down, and she kicked them off, and then he stood and stared into her eyes.

She held her breath and then let it rush out as he slipped his finger between her slit and moved it to her clitoris. She moaned as he continued to touch her, driving her wild. The feeling rushed over her, and she bit her lip as her orgasm hit her. Hard.

Shay placed her head against his chest, took deep breaths, then raised her head and looked at him.

“That was wonderful.”

“I’m just getting started, darlin’.” His fingers trailed along the elastic of her panties, making her heart race with anticipation. Then he pushed them down, and she stepped out of them. He looked up at her, leaned forward, and moved his tongue between her curls, driving her insane. When she came again, he stood, grabbed his wallet, removed a condom, and handed it to her. With a grin, she accepted it and ripped it open, quickly slipping it over him.

He wasted no time in sliding his fingers against her wetness while pushing himself inside of her. She couldn’t help but arch into him as he began thrusting harder and deeper. The feeling was overwhelming, and she closed her eyes tight as pleasure coursed through her body in waves.

He kept taking her harder, pushing her to new limits as they moved together. His lips found hers and their tongues twisted around each other as he drove into her harder and faster until Shay couldn’t take it any longer. With a final thrust, she broke apart around him, screaming out as she came.

Wes kept moving against her, and that feeling rushed over her again. Her legs shook as she clung onto him. When he groaned deep from his throat, they both tumbled over.

He placed his forehead on her shoulder and struggled to catch his breath. She knew exactly how he felt; would she ever be able to breathe normally again? That was incredible.

He raised his head, giving her one last kiss before letting go of her legs. Her knees buckled, but he held onto her.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m wonderful. God, that was great.”

“It was. I need to use the bathroom.” He stepped back from her but kept his hands on her.

“I’m okay. Go.” She waved her hand toward the bathroom and after staring at her for a few seconds, he pulled his jeans

up, zipped them, then walked to the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Shay shook her head. So, that was mind-blowing sex, and she wanted it again. She wanted *him* again. She found her panties, bra, jeans, and shirt, tugged them on, and then sat on the sofa. What now? She wondered if he'd do his best to get the hell out of Dodge now that they'd had sex.

She didn't know why she didn't feel remorse at having sex with a man she didn't even know.

"Maybe because you feel something when you look at him," she whispered.

She jerked when she heard the bathroom door open, then his boot heels on the hardwood floor as he walked to the living room. She looked over her shoulder to see him tucking his shirt into his jeans. Then he looked at her, leaned against the wall, and folded his arms. She stared into his eyes and smiled when a grin lifted his lips.

"Believe it or not, I didn't come here with you for that. I'm not complaining, trust me, but it was not my intention," he said.

Shay laughed. "Maybe it was mine."

He sucked in a breath. "Well, call me anytime you want to do that again."

She stood, walked around the sofa, and stopped before him.

"I will."

He smirked, pulled her into his arms, pressed his lips to hers, and then raised them slowly.

"I'd like to see you again, Shay."

"I'm not interested in a relationship right now, Wes."

"With sex that good?"

"So, only sex. Is that what you're saying?"

"No. I want to know you."

"I'd like that, but I'm not in a good place right now."

He took her hand, led her to the sofa, and nodded for her to sit. She did and stared into his beautiful eyes.

“Tell me.”

Shay sighed. “I was in a relationship that lasted over a year. When I first met Lyle, I thought he was a good man, but he soon showed his true self. I couldn’t even leave the house without him calling me every few minutes to see where I was, or who I was with. He would also belittle me, telling me I was nothing without him and that he’d make my life miserable if I ever left him. My thought was, how could it be more miserable than it already was? One day, when he left for a business trip, I packed my clothes and any items I wanted, and left. My uncle told me about Clifton. He’d driven through here and stopped for a few days. He thought I’d like it. I do. I love the town, but I also know that Lyle is looking for me. He’s so cocky.”

“Someone needs to knock him down a peg or two.”

Shay shook her head. “He comes across as this badass. He’s not.”

“I’d say he wasn’t either. Any man who acts like that does it because he wants to look intimidating, even though he’s far from it. He figures no one will call him on it if he acts tough.”

“He scares me. I’m not really sure of what he’s capable of.”

“Do you think he’s looking for you?”

“Without a doubt. He’ll find me, even if he has to hire a private investigator.”

“If you’re afraid of him, talk to the sheriff.”

“Maybe I should. I’ve lived here six months, and every day when the door to my shop opens, I’m afraid it will be him.”

“Then talk to the sheriff. Please. Shay, you can’t live in fear.” Wes touched her hair. “I want to see you. You’re the first woman I’ve been interested in for a long time. Although the sex was amazing, it’s not all about that. Let’s get to know each other before we do that again.”

“Are you serious? How do you suggest we do that?”

Wes shrugged. “Willpower.”

Shay stared at him and then laughed. “I don’t have much of that, or I would have left Lyle long ago.”

Wes kissed her lips and stared into her eyes.

“We’ll do it together.” He stood. “I’d better go. Let me walk you out.”

“I should have driven my car.”

“Did you walk?” he asked in a surprised voice.

“Yes. I walk to the shop daily but didn’t realize I’d be out when it got dark.”

“Come on, sweetheart. I’ll drive you home.”

“Okay. I’m going to move in tomorrow.”

“Good. I hope you have some help. I’m sorry but I won’t be able to help you. I have a full day ahead of me. I have to get up at four.”

“You ranchers and farmers are nuts.”

He laughed and nodded.

“That we are.”

“But we eat because of you, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

After driving her to her apartment, he walked her to the door and asked for her phone number. She gave it to him, watched him enter it into his phone, and then he called her.

“Now, you have mine.” He grinned. “I’ll call you soon, darlin’. Sleep well. I know I will.” He kissed her lips, nodded, jogged down the steps, and strode to his truck.

Shay watched him until he climbed into his truck, started it, and drove off. Then she leaned back against the door and grinned. Yeah, she’d like to do that again. Shaking her head, she opened the door, entered the apartment, and got ready for bed. She couldn’t wait to see him again.

Wes drove along the two-lane blacktop and shook his head. He sure hadn't been expecting that to happen. As he'd told her, he wasn't complaining, but he wasn't sure it had been a good idea. They didn't even know each other. He grinned. What better way to get to know someone than sex? If it had been awful, he wouldn't have suggested seeing her again, but it hadn't. It was amazing. Their chemistry was off the charts, and he hoped it hadn't been a fluke. A one-time thing.

He shook his head. It couldn't have been. It had been way too hot between them. He wanted her again, but he wanted to know her first and he knew that was going to be a challenge because he knew he'd want her anytime he was near her.

As he drove along the road, he glanced in the rearview mirror to see a vehicle behind him. It didn't bother him since there were other homes out this way, but for some reason, he felt uneasy. When he pulled into his driveway, he stopped, put the gear into park, and waited to see if the vehicle would go past. It did, but slowed down by the driveway. When Wes touched the brakes, the vehicle sped away.

Pulling up to his home, he shut the truck off, and stared out of the windshield into the darkening skies. With a heavy sigh, he opened the door, and stepped out.

The heat of the day still lingered but he knew that fall wasn't far behind, then winter. He wasn't a fan of the cold, but he was used to it. It was a tough decision about which weather was worse, summer or winter. He baked his ass off in the summer and froze his balls off in the winter. Neither appealed but such was the life of a rancher or farmer.

He shoved the truck door closed, walked up the steps, and entered his house. If he was lucky, he'd get a few hours of sleep. It wouldn't be the first time he'd be running on no sleep, and knew it wouldn't be the last.

He hoped that vehicle hadn't been following him. Though, why it would, he had no idea. Unless it was Shay's ex. Wes

hoped not, but he'd deal with him if the time came.

Later in the morning, he sat astride his horse and watched the men moving the cattle. The cattle were moved to lush pastures constantly. It kept the pasture quality by distributing the animal impact more evenly. It was an everyday occurrence. There were times when the cattle were moved a good distance and it took a week or more to move them. Wes always looked forward to that. He loved going on cattle drives.

Warren did too, but it had been two years since he'd done it. Wes wanted to get him to go on the next one. His brother spent a lot of time working on the books and business side of the ranch. He was the one in constant contact with buyers, shippers, and hauler companies. Wes didn't know how he kept up with it and he was glad he didn't have to. Warren had the business brains in the family. Wes was more of a hands on type. He needed to be out here, enjoying whatever the day brought.

It hadn't always been that way. After Warren returned from college, their father still ran the ranch, and had no desire to turn the reins over to either of his sons, but as he grew older, he slowed down, and did turn the ranch over to them. Their father had never been disappointed because under them, the ranch thrived. It became one of the best beef ranches in the state.

Wes saw one of the cows break from the herd and run. Wes let out a whistle and signaled at the cow. One of the riders, waved then rode after the cow. There were always a few that had to see if they could make a break for it.

Once they reached the pasture where they were leaving the herd, they dismounted and ate lunch. The sun beat down on the men, and Wes could feel sweat rolling down between his shoulder blades. Getting to his feet, he threw the paper towel into a small plastic bag, then walked to the creek.

He squatted, removed his hat and shirt, then dipped the hat into the water, and poured it over his head. He sighed as it cooled him down.

“Wes?”

He glanced over his shoulder to see one of the men.

“Yeah?”

“Uh, Tom and I were wondering if we could stay here a few nights to keep an eye on the cattle.”

Wes stood. “I was going to have someone else do it, but if you and Tom are willing, that’s fine, Joe.”

“Thanks. We like camping under the stars.”

“I can understand that. I expect you both back in two days.”

“Yes, sir. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll let Maverick know.”

Wes watched him walk away. He was glad Joe had suggested doing it. He liked having someone around the cattle after they were first moved. Rustlers will stake out a ranch, but if a few ranch hands were around, the rustlers moved on. They didn’t stick around too long when they were looking for livestock to take, and they didn’t want confrontations because they knew a rancher had the right to protect his property. Wes wouldn’t hesitate to shoot one of them for stealing his beef.

Liam Flynn, a good friend of his and Warren’s, was shot at recently when thieves were trying to take his cattle. It was dangerous to confront them, but Liam did exactly what he and Warren would have. They wouldn’t let those cattle go without a fight. Luckily Liam wasn’t hurt, and his cattle weren’t taken because Montana department of livestock had shown up.

Wes wasn’t sure what any farmer or rancher would do without the livestock division. Those agents put their lives on the line, and he appreciated it more than he could say.

As the men rode back to the barns, Wes wondered what Shay was doing. He glanced at his watch and saw it was past two. He was sure she was working. He’d love to see her, but it was hard to do during the week. He worked so much that when he arrived home, he’d shower, eat, hit the sheets, get up and do it all over again.

Removing his phone from his pocket, he scrolled through the numbers until he found hers, and called her.

“Hello, Weston,” she said when she answered. He’d never liked being called by his full name, but he sure liked it when she did.

“Hi, Shay. How’s your day going?”

“It’s been hectic today. It’s the first break I’ve had. I’m not complaining but it can get exhausting. What about you? How’s your day?”

“Good. I’m just getting back from moving some cattle.”

“Is your day over then?”

Wes chuckled. “Far from it. I have a lot to do when I get back.”

“Like what?”

“I have some inoculations to do, then hay needs stacked.”

“You don’t slow down, do you?”

“Can’t darlin’. Too much to do. Can I see you Saturday night?”

“Sure. What are we going to do?” she asked in a low voice.

Wes closed his eyes and shook his head.

“We can go to dinner.”

“Dinner sounds nice. Then what?”

“Stop it,” he snapped, but laughed when she did.

“I’m just wondering what we’ll do after dinner, Wes. That’s all. It was a simple innocent question.”

“It was in no way, simple, nor was it innocent. We’ll go to Dewey’s. Oh, hey, did you get moved into the apartment?”

“Yes, I love it.” Her sigh came over the line. “All right. We’ll go to Dewey’s after dinner. You’re not going to make this easy, are you, Coleman?”

Wes huffed a laugh. “We should get to know each other. I’ll make it easy as long as *you* don’t make it... hard.”

He chuckled when she laughed.

“Okay. I’ll do my best not to make it hard,” she said then snorted out a laugh.

“What have I gotten myself into? I’ll pick you up at seven. Will that work?”

“Yes, I close at four on Saturdays. Oh, a customer just came in. I’ll see you Saturday at seven, cowboy. Don’t work too hard.”

“I’m a rancher, sweetheart. It’s the only way I know. I’ll talk to you soon.” He disconnected and put the phone back into his pocket.

Wes rode into the barn, cooled his horse down, entered the office to make notes on the herd they’d moved, and then got busy with the rest of his day. He couldn’t wait to see Shay. They would not have sex. Nope.

“Like you’d turn her down if she wanted you.” He removed his hat, slapped it against his thigh, and resettled it.

Shay was going to drive him insane, he could see it coming. She was beautiful, smart, funny, and he liked her a lot. He wondered if it could turn into something deeper and he wouldn’t mind finding out, but they had to know one another to see if they were compatible. The sex was great, but a relationship can’t survive on that alone.

At nine that evening, Wes parked his truck at his home, climbed out, and made his way inside. He was exhausted. Even though the cattle that had needed inoculated were round up, a few of them were doing their best not to be put in the chutes. It made for a long, dusty, dirty day. Wes was sure he had dust and grime in places it shouldn’t be.

He hung his hat on a peg, sat on a chair and toed off his boots. He was so tired, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to stand in the shower, but he also knew he couldn’t go to bed dirty.

With a resigned sigh, he strode to the bathroom, stripped, turned the water on, then stepped into the stall. He groaned as the hot water hit his tired body. The water, brown from the dust and grime, swirled around the drain, and disappeared.

After washing his hair and himself, he slid the glass door open, pulled a towel off the rack and dried off. He wrapped it around his waist, stepped out, and walked to the sink. He swiped his hand across the steamed up mirror, then shaved. He didn't even feel like eating but he had to, or he'd be starving later.

After eating a sandwich, he turned out the lights, locked the doors to the house, and headed for bed. It would be four before he knew it.

Shay sat on her sofa, watching TV, waiting for Wes. She was so happy she was able to get this apartment. She loved it. She'd added a few items to make it homey, but it didn't need much.

She thought about Wes and couldn't wait to see him. She liked him a lot, but what would happen with Lyle. That man was a bully, and she prayed every night that he never found her, but she also knew he'd never give up. God help her when he found her. He had never raised a hand to her, but he had been controlling, and very jealous. He even hated it when she would hang out with her friends.

She was glad Wes knew about Lyle but if he did show up, would Wes stick around? If he didn't want to see her anymore, she'd understand, but she hoped he did. Some men didn't like confrontations, and backed off anytime someone pressured them. There was nothing wrong with that, as far as she was concerned, because who wanted to be in a relationship with a jealous ex in the background?

Lyle was the type of man who thought a woman was beneath him, and needed to be kept in her place. That was not Shay. She loved living her own life and no man would tell her how she could live or who she could be friends with. He would hate this town because he didn't like people in his business, and as much as she loved Clifton, and the

surrounding towns, she was familiar with how they knew a person's business, but it was never malicious. It's just the way the towns were.

The first time someone entered her shop, she learned how much the town knew about her. It shocked her at first, because she was a private person, but once she learned it wasn't meant to be hurtful, she didn't mind. In fact, the towns protected their own, and she'd need support when Lyle showed up.

When her cellphone buzzed from the coffee table, she glared at it.

"That better not be you cancelling, Coleman."

She picked it up and smiled when she saw her uncle's face.

"Uncle Lou, it's so nice to hear from you."

"Hey, there Shay. How is the town of Clifton treating you?"

"Like I've lived here my entire life. It's wonderful."

"I had a feeling you'd like it. It's a great community."

"It's not just Clifton. There are towns on both sides of it that are just as great. Hartland and Spring City. It's so wonderful here."

"I'm so happy to hear that, honey. I'm going to be heading to a gallery in Utah in about a week, and I'd love to see you."

"Oh, please stop by. I'd love to see you too." A knock sounded on her door. "I'm sorry, Uncle Lou, but my date is here."

"You have date? A nice man I hope."

"He's great. I just met him." *And he rocked my world.*

"You sound a little excited. You don't know how happy that makes me. I'll let you go. We'll talk when I get there."

"I have a new apartment, with a spare bedroom, so you can stay here." She walked to the door, opened it, and almost swallowed her tongue looking at Wes. Their eyes met and held.

“Shay?” her uncle said.

“Oh! I’m sorry, Uncle Lou. I really need to go. I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

“Love you too, honey. Have fun. I can’t wait to meet your man.” He disconnected.

Shay disconnected, and stared at Wes, and watched a smirk lift his lips.

“Meet your man?”

“You heard him?” Heat poured into her cheeks.

“Yes. You’re standing close enough.”

“I just told him I was going out on a date...”

“It’s fine.” He smiled. “Are you ready?”

“I am. Let me get my purse.”

“All right. You look beautiful, by the way.”

“Thank you, and you look very handsome.”

“Aww, thank you, ma’am.”

She picked up her purse, turned to look at him and their eyes met again. She grinned when he closed his eyes, then opened them and stared at her.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Are you sure you want to go out?”

“We’re going out to dinner, then Dewey’s, so stop thinking you can change my mind. I have more self-control than you’re giving me credit for.”

Shay laughed. “Well, I’m glad one of us does.”

He opened the door, and nodded for her to go out, and when she did, he followed her, pulling the door closed behind him. She locked it and looked at him.

“I’ve never been to the restaurant you’re taking me to.”

“It has great food. It’s a fancier restaurant than the diner, but you don’t have to dress up.”

“Are you telling me I don’t have to wear these damn shoes?”

Wes chuckled. “You don’t, but I’m glad you are.”

“Of course you are. You’re a man.”

“Yes, but I’ll be on my best behavior for you tonight.”

“No need for that, but let’s see how dinner goes.”

“Have you been to Dewey’s?”

“No. I’ve heard about it, but I didn’t want to go alone.”

“That’s a good idea. Some of my friend’s wives go there once a month for a girl’s night out.”

“I bet they have fun.”

Wes grinned. “Yeah, I’m sure. Well, let’s go, darlin’. I’m starving.”

When they arrived at the restaurant, Wes opened her door, and held her hand as they walked through the parking lot. He opened the door for her and nodded for her to enter, then he followed her inside.

“Welcome to the Hartland Restaurant, do you have a reservation?” a woman behind a podium asked.

“Yes, ma’am. For Coleman.”

“Yes, sir. Please follow me.” She picked up menus then led them to a booth. “Will this do?”

“Shay? Is a booth, okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.” She smiled at the woman then slid into the booth.

Wes removed his hat, placed it on the bench, upside down, then slid in across from her.

“What would you like to drink?” the hostess asked them.

“Shay?”

“Chardonnay, please.”

“I’ll have a beer. Whatever’s on tap.”

“I’ll be right back with those.”

“Thank you.” Wes smiled.

“This looks like a nice place.” Shay glanced around.

“It is. The food is fantastic. No matter what you get, it’ll be good.”

Shay picked up the menu and scanned it.

“What do you suggest?”

He grinned. “Everything. If you like seafood, you can’t beat the platter. The steaks melt in your mouth.”

“What are you getting?”

“A ribeye.”

“Um, okay.” She looked over the menu again. “I’ll get the seafood platter.”

“I’ve had it. It’s great.”

The hostess returned with their drinks and told them their server would be by shortly, then left them.

“Why aren’t you married, Weston?”

“I never found anyone I wanted to settle down with. What about you?”

“I’ve never married. I lived with Lyle for a year.” She shook her head. “I don’t know how I put up with him that long.”

“He wasn’t like that when you met, though, was he?”

“He was great at first. It wasn’t until we moved in together that he started getting overly possessive and his jealous rages were scary.”

“He never raised his hand to you, did he?” Wes clenched his jaw.

“No, but he didn’t need to. There is more than physical abuse.”

“I know, and I don’t like any of it, but if he had hit you, I’d have to kick his ass.” He shrugged. “I might, anyway.”

Shay laughed. "I'd love to see that. Although, he would act all big and tough."

"He likes to act tough."

"He puts on these airs that he can kick anyone's ass. I think he's all talk. If someone stood up to him, he'd probably piss his pants."

Wes laughed, then sobered.

"Do you really think he'll show up?"

"I know he will."

"I want to know when he does." He picked up his beer and took a swig.

"I'll let you know."

He nodded. The server stopped at their table.

"Hi, my name is Marco, and I'm your server. Have you decided yet?"

Wes nodded and told him what they wanted, then he looked across the table at her. He had a way of looking at her that made her feel as if she were the only woman in the room. The world. She stared into his eyes, and would love to know him, but she was scared. She had to get Lyle to leave her alone first before she got involved with any man. As she looked at him, his eyes dropped to her lips, then back into her eyes. She smiled, then laughed when he groaned.

"You're doing that on purpose."

"I'm not doing anything. I smiled at you."

"An evil smile. You know you're tearing me apart, and you're enjoying it."

Shay laughed. "You make me sound mean."

"Not mean, just..." He shook his head.

"What?"

"Devious." He nodded. "Yeah, that's it. You're devious. You think you can change my mind about sex."

“Is it working?” She grinned.

“No,” he snapped then laughed when she did.

Their server carried a tray to their table, then set their dinners on the table.

“If you need anything else, just let me know. Enjoy your meals.”

Shay leaned over her plate and inhaled.

“Oh, my God. That smells fantastic.”

“It is. Try it.”

She picked up her fork, speared a shrimp, and put it into her mouth. When the flavors hit her tongue, she closed her eyes and moaned.

“So good.” She looked around. “I can see why it’s so crowded.”

“It’s hard to get in sometimes.”

“How did you get a reservation?”

“I know the owner. I’ll call him if I need to.”

“Well, it’s nice to have friends in high places.”

“Yes, ma’am. Eat up, then we’ll head to Dewey’s.”

“Can’t wait.”

They ate in a comfortable silence. She was having a good time with him and couldn’t wait to go to the bar. It had been ages since she’d been out and even longer than that with a man. After everything she went through with Lyle, another man was the last thing she needed, but she liked Wes a lot, and she knew, in her heart, that he was nothing like Lyle. Maybe she’d see if this thing with Weston Coleman amounted to anything.

Chapter Three

After dinner, Wes signaled the server and asked for the check. He was ready to get out of here. Shay was driving him insane, and she wasn't even trying. Her beautiful hair flowed in waves around her shoulders and down her back. He was sure his dick had been hard since he set eyes on her the first time he saw her in the diner.

He paid the check, held her hand, and led her out the door. He was anxious to take her to Dewey's. It might just be a small-town cowboy bar, but it was a fun place.

Wes opened the door for her, and she stepped onto the running board, then turned to face him. He frowned, and she laughed.

"Devious," he murmured.

Shay leaned forward and kissed his lips.

"Horny."

He barked out a laugh.

"I appreciate the honesty."

"Wes, I want you to know that I never do that."

"Do what?" He raised his eyebrow.

"Have sex with a man I don't know."

"I know that. The heat of the moment got to us." He shrugged.

"Yes, and I agree we should get to know each other and I'm all for that—"

"Good."

"But isn't sex a good way to know each other?" She grinned. He knew she was teasing him.

“It is, and we know we’re good at that together, so let’s see how we get along out of bed.”

“It wasn’t a bed.”

“Don’t nitpick. You know what I meant.”

“I do. I think I like teasing you, Weston Coleman.”

“Wonderful,” he muttered.

She laughed and slid onto the seat. He pushed the door closed, strolled around the truck, and climbed into the cab. After glancing at her, he started the truck, and drove them to Dewey’s.

“It looks like I’ll have to park around back.”

“Is it always like this?”

“Fridays and Saturdays pack them in.”

“I can hear music.” She smiled.

“It’s loud, crowded, and busy. I don’t know how the servers keep up.”

He found a spot, pulled into it, and looked at her.

“Ready?”

“Definitely.”

He stared at her, then looked at her lips, and swore when she parted her lips, and ran her tongue over her bottom lip.

“Stop,” he growled.

“I’m not doing anything. You’re obviously thinking things you’re telling me not to, so who’s the one having trouble not wanting sex?”

“Okay, that’s where you’re wrong. I want sex, but I’m going to behave. You’re the one who can’t.”

“It was so good, though. Wasn’t it?”

“Yes, and that’s all I’m saying on the subject. Let’s go inside and have a good time.”

“If we must,” she said then laughed when he shook his head, opened the door, and stepped from the truck.

He grinned as he strode around the truck, opened her door, and put his hand out for her. She placed hers in his, stepped out, and they walked to the front of the bar. The music was loud, and each time a door opened, he could hear people laughing and talking. It was a great bar, and it had been a while since he’d been here. He was looking forward to it.

Once inside, he led her through the crowd to the bar, and held her hand while she climbed onto a stool, and he sat on the one next to her. He raised his hand to get a bartender’s attention, and smiled when he saw Scarlett Conway, the owner of the bar, walking toward him.

“Hey, Wes. I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Hi, Scarlett. Yeah, it’s been a while. This is Shay Rogers. Shay, Scarlett Conway, the owner of Dewey’s.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Shay,” Scarlett said as she put her out for her to shake.

Shay shook her hand, and smiled.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Scarlett. I love this place.”

“Thanks. What can I get you to drink?” Scarlett looked at Shay then him.

“I’ll have a Callahan whiskey on the rocks. Shay?”

“Just a soda, please.”

“I’ll be right back with those.” Scarlett walked off.

“She seems nice.”

“She’s great, and married to a good friend of mine.”

“So, you haven’t been in here for a while, huh?”

“No. I don’t have a lot of free time. We’re so busy at the ranch.”

“You need time to relax.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Shay laughed and he chuckled. When Scarlett brought their drinks back, he picked his up, and sipped.

“My uncle drinks that whiskey.”

“It’s good. Smooth. It’s made in Spring City.”

“The town outside of Clifton?”

“Yes. The Callahan family runs it, and Jaxon and Devin Callahan also run the Bur Oak guest ranch there.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, you haven’t been here long.”

“Not yet.”

“I hope you plan on staying, sweetheart. I like you.”

“I like you too. As long as I don’t have to run again, I’ll stay.”

“Do not run from him, Shay. He’d just follow. You need to try to stand up to him, and I’ll be there with you. He’s a damn bully.”

“He is a bully, Wes, but he scares me. I have no idea what he’d do.”

“I suppose we’ll find out, but I am not scared of him. Is he a big guy?”

Shay sputtered out a laugh.

“No. He’s just under six feet. He has blond hair, blue eyes, and he’s thin. But he acts like he’s built bigger. He’s very narcissistic.”

“Yeah, he needs taken down a peg or two, and I’m the man to do it.”

Shay touched his hand.

“Please don’t antagonize him when he shows. It will just make him angry.”

“Do you think that bothers me? Come on, Shay. Be honest. You know he needs to be put in his place. He bullies women

because he's stronger, but put him up against a man, and I guarantee you, he will back down."

"I think he's all talk." She laughed. "And some of the things he says when he's trying to be macho." She shook her head.

"Like what?" He sipped his whiskey.

"Like, I'll wipe the floor up with you, or I'll beat you like you stole something."

Wes inhaled then coughed when the whiskey went down wrong. He set the glass down and laughed.

"You're serious?"

"Yes." Shay laughed. "The first time I heard him say it was in a nightclub. I laughed and that pissed him off, but it was ridiculous for him to act all tough. In fact, the man he said it to, laughed, and walked off."

"I wonder how people get that way. I mean, what happened in their life that gave them the attitude they're better than everyone?"

"There actually is a condition for it. It's called narcissistic personality disorder, or NPD, but it's rare. Lyle doesn't have it. He's just an ass."

"Did you ever report him?"

"God, no. Wes, he thinks he's above all that. No one can touch him, and a restraining order would just piss him off. He'd never let a piece of paper run him off."

"You should still tell the sheriff about him. You don't have to get a restraining order if you don't think it will help, but if Sam knows, he'll have his deputies watch for him. The bad thing is, this time of the year, the towns are filled with tourists."

"I could give him a photo of him, if you think it would help."

"I do, darlin'."

Shay nibbled on her lip, then nodded.

“All right.”

“Great.” Wes winked, then grinned when she did.

Later, when the band played a slow song, Wes put his hand out to her.

“Dance?”

“I’d love to.”

Shay turned into his arms, and placed her hands on his shoulders, and he gripped her hips. She stepped closer, put her head against his chest, and sighed when his hands pulled her tight against him.

“I like this bar,” she said.

“It’s a great place.” He placed his cheek on her head.

Shay couldn’t get over how right this felt. She loved the feel of his arms around her, but she was afraid about Lyle. He’d show up. There was no way he’d let her go without a fight. He refused to accept that she would never go back to him.

It didn’t matter if he never hit her. He belittled her constantly and she couldn’t take it any longer. Thank God her uncle drove through the town of Clifton and suggested it. He was always taking care of her, and she loved him for it. Lou Rogers never married, and he adored his niece.

She had been devastated when her father died, and so had her uncle. He and her father had been close, and she knew her uncle was torn apart when his brother had died. If not for her uncle, Shay would be alone in the world.

“Are you okay? You’re shaking,” Wes’s voice rumbled under her ear.

“Yes. I’m just thinking of my uncle and how I ended up here.” She gazed up at Wes. “I’m glad I’m here, Wes, but I

know Lyle's going to show."

"And we'll take care of it when he does. Shay, stay. I think we could have something."

"I do too. I'm just scared."

"Not of me, I hope."

"No. I know you'd never hurt me. There had been signs with Lyle after we got serious, but I ignored them. I was sure I was imagining things. I don't see any of those signs with you. It got worse with him when we moved in together."

"Do you have any idea what my mother would do to me, or Warren for that matter, if we were disrespectful to a woman?" he asked with a mock shudder, making her laugh.

"So, you're more afraid of your mom than your dad?"

"Definitely. All that woman has to do is give us that damn look women do all the time when someone messes up, and we know we're in trouble."

Shay laughed. "You men think because you were created first, that women are second best."

"Not me. I think God saved the best for last."

"Aww, how sweet, but, yeah, you're right." She laughed when he chuckled.

She liked Weston Coleman. A lot. The sex was great, but he was a wonderful man, and even though she hadn't known him long, she trusted him. She knew he'd never do the things Lyle had done. She'd love to know him better, but she had to be careful. Lyle was going to make her life miserable, and she hated the thought of Wes being in the middle of it.

When the song ended, Wes led her back to the bar, and they sat on the stools. As the night wore on, Shay relaxed as much as she could, but she kept watching the crowd. She knew he wasn't here because he would never hide. He'd make his presence known in some way. He would toy with her first and she wasn't looking forward to it.

She jumped when Wes touched her hand.

“I’m sorry. I’m out of sorts since talking about him.”

“It’s okay. We can go, so you can relax.”

“All right.”

Wes waved a bartender over, paid his tab, took Shay’s hand, and led her outside then to his truck. Shay followed him, but glanced around. Was he here already? She was sure someone was watching her. She practically ran to keep up with Wes’s long strides. Once they reached his truck, she sighed with relief.

As she waited for Wes to open her door, she glanced around again, and gasped when she saw him. She knew he’d show up, but she’d been hoping for more time. *Time? For what? To run again?*

“What?” Wes asked her.

“Lyle is over there,” she said as she pointed toward a truck.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll handle this.” Wes helped her into the truck. “Lock this door.” He strode across the parking lot.

Shay watched as he disappeared behind the truck. She held her breath waiting for him to reappear. When he finally did, she blew out a relieved sigh. She opened the door and stepped out.

“I didn’t see him. Are you sure it was him?”

“Weston, that man has terrorized me for over a year. I know what he looks like,” she snapped.

“I’m sorry. I know you do. It’s just that it’s dark...”

“It could be pitch black and I’d know it’s him. Please, can we go?”

“Of course.”

Wes took her hand, held it while she climbed back inside, closed the door, then he sauntered around the front, slid onto the seat, and looked at her.

“Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

“I thought we were going to behave?”

“I have plenty of spare room.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.” He sighed. “Shay, I like you. You know that, but I want to know you, not just how good you are in bed.”

“It wasn’t a bed.” She grinned.

“Okay, how good you are against a wall. Happy now?”

She laughed. “I’d be happier if we had sex.”

“We’re not having sex until we know each other better. Now, do you want to stay with me or at your apartment? I just thought you’d feel safer with me. Especially since you think you saw him.”

“I did not *think* I saw him. I did. Wes, please. You have to believe me. It was him.”

“Okay, then stay with me.”

“He’s not going to get into my apartment. I’ll go home. Alone.”

“All right, but don’t open that door for him.”

“There’s no way I would. Maybe he’d get the point.”

“I don’t think he cares. I just want you safe.”

“I’ll be fine. I won’t let him know how scared I am.”

“Okay.”

“Now, if you want me to go home with you and sleep in the same bed, that I can do.”

“It’s not easy for me either, you know.”

“Are you saying, it’s... *hard* for you?”

“Stop it,” he growled. “We did this backwards. Sex should have been after we got to know each other not before.”

“People have one-night stands all the time.”

“Is that how you want to take that? As a one-night stand?”

“No. I’m just saying that people have sex with someone they just met all the time.”

“True, but the thing about that is, they know they’re going to have sex and it would be a one-time thing. Rarely do they have a relationship after that. I had no intention of having sex with you that day. It just happened.”

“It was good though, wasn’t it?” She smirked.

“Yes. But we’re going to go out and get to know each other, then take it from there.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Hey, I don’t like it any more than you do, but don’t we need to see if we’re compatible? And don’t say we are with sex. I already know that.”

“I get it. I do. We’ll do it your way.” She shook her head. “I have never done anything like that in my life. I have to know a man first, but you...”

“It’s my fault?”

“In a way. You didn’t even have to turn on the charm. It was instantaneous. I wanted you the minute I looked into your eyes the first time I saw you.”

“When?”

“The first time I saw you in the diner. When I walked in and saw you, it was like someone kicked me in my gut.”

“But you kept looking away from me anytime I looked at you.”

“Because it shocked me that I felt that way, and I sure didn’t want you to see that I was attracted to you. But I have a lot on my plate with Lyle. I’d hate for you to get caught up in it.”

“Looks like I already am. I’m not going to back down from him. When he wants to show his face to me, I’ll be ready.” He touched her hand, making her look at him. “I want to know the

minute he does anything. I don't care what time it is, you call me."

"I promise I will. Can you take me home now?"

"Sure thing." Wes started the truck, drove out of the lot, and then through the parking lot of the diner to around the back alley. He parked at the bottom of the steps.

"Do you want to come in?"

"No. I need to get home and get some sleep, but I will walk you up."

"You don't have to. You can watch from here."

"No goodnight kiss?"

"Is that the only way I get one, if you walk me up?"

Wes grinned. "Yes."

Shay huffed. "All right. Come on then."

When Wes opened his door, she did the same, and met him at the front of the truck. He took her hand, and they walked up the steps. Shay stopped when a noise from the alley startled her.

"What was that?"

"Get inside and I'll check it out before I go."

At the stoop, she unlocked the door, then looked at him.

"I had a great time."

"I did too. We'll do it again. Go on in, Shay. I can tell you're frightened. Are you sure you don't want to go home with me?"

"I'll be fine once I get inside. I won't open the door for anyone."

"Okay, but you can't stay hidden inside."

"He won't bother me during the day. Too many people around, but he will let me know he's here."

"I believe you. We'll see how it goes. We'll be ready when he makes his move. I'm not worried about him at all, but I

know he scares you, and that pisses me off.”

“You’d better go. You have to get up at an ungodly hour.”

“Life of a rancher. I’ll call you later. Sleep well.” He lightly kissed her lips, and walked down the steps.

“*Whoa!* Is that it? That’s the goodnight kiss?”

He grinned, jogged back up the steps, cupped her face in his hands, and lowered his lips to hers. He tugged her close, and deepened the kiss, moving his tongue into her mouth. When she moaned, he slowly lifted his lips.

“Better?”

“Yes. Stay with me.”

“Can’t. Go in and lock the door. I’ll call you tomorrow. I’m going to check around, but I think it might have just been an animal. Goodnight, darlin’.” He touched the brim of his hat, jogged down the steps, then turned and motioned for her to go inside.

With a deep sigh, she pushed the door open, stepped inside, closed it and locked it behind her. She wished he would have stayed.

Wes walked along the alley but didn’t see or hear anything. He hated how frightened Shay was of Newman being in Clifton. Wes hated bullies, and especially men who treated women in that manner.

Wes needed to get Shay to talk to Sam. Since it was tourist season, it would be difficult finding Newman, but if the sheriff’s department had a photo to go by, maybe they’d be able to find him.

Wes walked back to his truck, climbed in, and drove home. He hated leaving Shay alone, but as long as she didn’t open the door, she’d be fine, and he doubted Newman would show his face during the day. Not yet at least.

Pulling into the driveway of his home, he parked the truck beside the porch, opened the door, stepped out, and glanced around.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but he had the feeling he was being watched. He didn't know who or what it could be, but he was sure it wasn't Newman. He would never confront a man. He just wanted Shay. Son of a bitch. Wes wanted to meet this coward.

After looking around, he climbed the steps, entered the house, locked the door, and headed straight to bed.

The next morning, Wes rode his horse along the fence. Most of the men were moving a few head of cattle, so he took this job. It wasn't bad except on days it was so hot, it felt like your skin was melting or so cold, it froze you to the saddle. Neither was appealing but it had to be done.

As he rode along, he called Shay. She should be at her shop by now.

"Hi," she said when she answered.

"Hey. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. No problems walking here this morning."

"You should drive."

"It's two blocks, Wes."

"A lot can happen in two blocks."

"Now you're scaring me."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I don't mean to do that. I just want you safe and I don't trust that son of a bitch."

"I don't either. All right, I'll drive from now on."

"Good. Thank you. I want you to talk to Sam today."

"I'll do it on my lunch hour."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No, that's okay. I can walk to the sheriff's department."

"All right. Just keep an eye out, okay?"

“I promise. What are you doing?”

“On my way back to the barn after riding the fence then I have some hay to bale.”

“I can tell you’re happy about that.” She laughed.

“It’s a job no one likes, especially in the baking sun. I’ll call you later, darlin’. You have a good day.”

“You too, cowboy. I’ll talk to you soon.” She disconnected.

Wes grinned and pocketed his phone then continued along the fence.

Shay smiled as she set the phone on the counter. He’d probably been up for hours. She shook her head. The man got up in the dark, worked all day, and went home in the dark. She didn’t know how anyone did it, but he seemed to love it.

When the bell chimed, she looked to see people entering, and helped them find some items. They were tourists and couldn’t say enough about the town. Shay could understand that. It was a picturesque place, and everyone was wonderful. She hoped she never had to leave it.

After eating her lunch at the diner, she crossed the street, and walked to the big red building at the center of town, climbed the cement steps, and entered. She stopped at the glass display case hanging on the wall, and once she found what she was looking for, she headed in that direction.

She stopped at the door with frosted glass, and the Sheriff’s Department scrolled on it, with Sheriff Sam Garrett under it. She took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped to the counter, but no one was there. Maybe everyone was out to lunch. She saw a bell on the counter, and tapped it.

“Can I help you?”

Shay spun around to see who that deep voice belonged to and clenched her jaw. The man was very good-looking. In fact,

she was sure if you looked up tall, dark, and gorgeous in the dictionary, this man's photo would be there. Not that Wes, or even Warren, weren't gorgeous, there was just something hot and sexy about this man. Was it the badge? Gun? Blue eyes? Yes. Yes, and yes.

"Uh, hi. Yes, I'm looking for the sheriff."

"I'm Sheriff Garrett. What can I do for you?"

"I moved here in December. I'm Shay Rogers and I own A Touch of Glass. I, uh..." She wrung her hands.

"How about we go into my office?" he asked her with a smile.

She sighed. "That would be great."

The sheriff had her follow him into an office, and nodded for her to sit in one of the wooden oak chairs, and he strode around the old desk, pulled the chair up behind him, and sat. He folded his hands on the top.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Rogers?"

"My ex-boyfriend is looking for me—"

"Have you seen him?"

Shay was surprised that he didn't even question her accusation. Not that she really gave one, but she knew the sheriff could feel her fear.

"I'm certain I saw him when Wes and I left Dewey's the other night. I left him as soon as I had the opportunity. I know for a fact, he is not happy about that. He won't stop until he gets to me. I'm not exaggerating, Sheriff."

"I know you're not. My wife went through something similar. Did he abuse you?"

"Mentally."

"Just as bad in my book. The bad thing is, this time of the year, we have people from all over the states here. It's a needle in a haystack."

She opened her purse, pulled out a photo, and slid it across the desk. She watched the sheriff pick it up, and his jaw clenched.

“That’s the most recent photo I have, but Wes thought it would be a good idea to show it to you.”

“Wes? Wes Coleman?”

“Yes. We’re dating.”

“Congratulations. Wes is a good man.” He picked up the photo. “I’ll make copies to give to shop owners, B and B, and hotel. They’ll watch for him. What’s his name?”

“Lyle Newman.”

“Where do you live?” Sam wrote down everything she told him.

“In the apartment above the diner. Connie let me have it.” Shay smiled.

“Connie and Owen are the best. Is your shop close to it?”

“Two blocks.”

“Drive. I don’t care how close it is, there are a lot of people out. We don’t have a high crime rate here, but that doesn’t mean it can’t happen.”

“Wes told me to drive too. It seems silly being that close, but I understand where you’re coming from. I’d hate to walk in that alley alone.”

“Right. Park close to the steps, and you’ll be fine.” He glanced at his watch, and stood. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Shay stood. “I appreciate your time.”

“It’s what we’re here for. I’ll walk you out.”

“Are you always here, alone?”

Sam grinned. “No. My daytime deputies are out patrolling and the woman who sits at the counter is on vacation this week, which also gives me one.” She frowned, and Sam

laughed. “She’s my godmother and a real pain, and she can tell you everything going on in this town, but I love her.”

“She sounds like a character.”

“That’s one way to put it.” Sam opened the door for her, and they entered the lobby, then he opened the door to the hallway.

They walked outside, and Shay immediately wanted to go back into the cooler air.

“Thank you so much for talking with me, Sheriff.”

“Sam, and you’re welcome. Have a good day. I’m sure we’ll speak again. I’ll get copies of the photos out and we’ll have one in each cruiser.”

“I appreciate it, Sam.”

“No problem. Let me walk you to your shop, then I’ll head for the diner. I have to meet my wife for lunch. Have you eaten lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. If not, you could join us. I’m sure Tessa would be a good person to talk to about your situation.”

“I’d love to meet her, but I need to get back to the shop.”

“All right, let’s go then.”

After reaching her shop, Sam touched the brim of his hat, then strode away. She entered the shop, turned the sign over, headed to the back office, and put her purse in the safe. She hoped the day would go quickly. The thought that Lyle could be watching her had her on edge.

Chapter Four

As June became July then August, Shay wondered when Lyle would make his appearance again. She knew it was just a matter of time. At closing time, she locked the door behind her, and walked to her SUV. As she started to open the door, she frowned when she saw something on the windshield.

Taking a deep breath, she moved closer, and gasped when she saw it was a note. She quickly glanced around. Her hand shook as she reached for it. She removed it from under the wiper, and ran up the steps.

At the stoop, her hand shook so badly that she had trouble inserting the key. She took a deep breath, inserted the key, and unlocked the door. She turned to close the door, and quickly glanced around the alley, but she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Stepping inside the apartment, she locked the door, and as an added precaution, she locked the other four, and slid the chain on.

She didn't know the story behind all the locks, but she was thankful they were there now. She set her purse on the table, walked to the sofa, sat, and stared at the paper in her hand.

God! She didn't want to unfold it because she knew. She knew it was from Lyle. Inhaling deeply, she unfolded the note and gasped when she read it. *It's nice to see you again, Shay.* There was no signature, but there didn't need to be.

Tossing it onto the coffee table, she took her cellphone from her pocket and called Wes.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"Wes—" her voice caught so she tried again. "Wes, he's been here."

"Where?" he asked, and she could hear the anger in his voice.

"At my shop. He left a note on my windshield."

"What did it say?"

“It’s nice to see you again, Shay.”

“Son of a bitch. He’s watching you.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Come here and stay with me.”

“What? No. I can’t put you out.”

“For God’s sake, Shaylyn, I suggested it. I don’t want you alone.”

“I knew I should have gotten a dog.”

“I wish you had one too, but since you don’t, come here.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Will you? Because I can hear the fear in your voice, Shay.”

“I’m so scared,” she whispered, and her voice shook.

“Then come here, baby. I’ll come and get you.”

“I need my vehicle, Wes. I still have a store to run.”

“Okay, but I’m coming there. I don’t want you going out alone at all.”

“Please.”

“All right, darlin’. I’m on my way. Do not open that door for anyone but me. Keep the note. We’ll show it to Sam.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there soon.” He disconnected.

Shay put her phone on the cushion, stood, walked to the front window, and gazed out. Not many people were out, but she checked every one of them, looking for him. She knew he wouldn’t just sit back. He let her know he was around, to frighten her.

She went to her bedroom and packed a small bag. She didn’t know how long she’d be staying with Wes. She could always come back and get more if she needed to. After packing the bag, she sat on the bed, and stared at the wall.

She hadn't realized how long she'd been there until a knock at the door made her jump. She stood, crept out the hallway, and made her way to door. She sighed with relief when Wes called out to her.

"Shay? Open the door, sweetheart."

She turned the locks, pulled the door open and threw herself into his arms, and he wrapped them around her.

"I've got you." He stepped over the threshold, closed the door, and pulled her back into his arms. "You're shaking, baby. I won't let him hurt you. In any way. If you're ready, we can go."

"All right. Let me get my bag, and I'll follow you."

Once they arrived at Wes's place, Shay breathed a little easier. She opened her door, stepped out, and met Wes at the front of his truck. He carried her suitcase to the back door, unlocked it, and nodded for her to enter, then he followed her inside.

He set the bag down, removed his hat, and hung it on a peg.

"Let me take your bag to the bedroom," he said as he stepped behind her.

"Thank you. Your kitchen is beautiful. I love log homes. Is Warren's house the same?"

"No. He has a modern farmhouse."

"Oh, I love those too." Shay looked at him. "Where am I sleeping?"

They stared at each other, and she smiled when a smirk lifted his lips.

"With me," he murmured. "I can't take this any longer."

"Good. I can't either—" She squealed when he picked her up, carried her out of the kitchen, and down a hallway. "I want to see the house."

"We'll start with the bedroom."

He closed the door behind him, carried her over to the bed, and placed her in the center. He lay down beside her. She struggled to focus, but his lips on hers stole her attention. Shay raked her fingers through his hair as he moved his hands over her belly. He tugged off her sweater before gazing at her breasts in her lace bra. After removing it, his lips moved around one of her nipples, and she couldn't keep still.

“Relax,” he murmured, looking up into her eyes.

“I'm trying,” she said, struggling for breath. “I need you so much, Weston.”

“I need you too,” he murmured, voice low with desire. “But I'm going to take my time. It's been too long.”

She laughed softly and cupped his cheek. “You're the one who said no sex. Crazy man.”

Wes let out a laugh. “I guess it's true; I am crazy. About you.”

Shay ran her hand over his face, and softly said, “I feel the same about you.”

Wes smiled before lowering his lips onto hers, taking them in a deep kiss as he slowly undid the snap of her jeans. He brought down the zipper and slipped his hand inside her panties.

Shay stopped breathing, anticipation rising within her. His finger moved along her slit and she moaned out loud. Shay unzipped his jeans and slipped her hand inside to feel his hard cock pressing against the fabric of his boxer briefs. She squeezed it slightly, and heard him groan in pleasure.

Reaching deeper into his jeans, she attempted to push them off, but Wes rolled away from her so that he could stand and remove his clothing himself. He kicked off his boots, took off his jeans and shirt, then pushed his boxer briefs down to reveal his hard dick. Wes took off her boots before removing the rest of her clothes until she was in only her blue panties. His eyes were burning with heat looking at her.

“You drive me crazy, Shay. But in every good way possible.”

He moved up her legs, then stopped at the juncture of her thighs. He lowered his head, kissed her belly above her curls, then slid his tongue through them to her clitoris. She hissed in a breath as that wonderful feeling rushed over her and she cried out his name when she came.

As she lay there trying to catch her breath, he moved up her body, keeping his weight off her with his elbows, then reached into the nightstand and removed a condom. She took it from him, tore it open, and rolled the condom down over his cock. He groaned when she wrapped her hand around him and squeezed.

Wes kissed her passionately as he inched into her body. She needed him so desperately and tilted her hips to get him deeper. She clung tightly to him with her legs and arms, matched his rhythm until the wave came over her again and she screamed out in pleasure. His low growl sounded from his chest as he came.

“God, I am crazy,” he said between breaths. “Why did I decide it was a good idea not having sex?”

Shay laughed in response then Wes chuckled, lifted his head, stared into her eyes, and kissed her lips. He pulled the covers up around them after rolling off her and tucked her in close to his body. He kissed her forehead before getting out of bed and entering the bathroom. Shay waited for him in bed, exhausted but wanting his warmth back around her.

The following day, Shay had a lull in customers at the shop, so she did some dusting. Two women entered the store as she worked, and Shay looked up.

“Hi, welcome to A Touch of Glass. I’m Shay Rogers, the owner. If you have questions, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I’m Jessa Hunter, and this is—”

“Kay O’Malley,” Shay said in shock.

“It’s Yates, now, but yes, it’s me. It’s nice to meet you, Shay.” Kay smiled at her.

Shay glanced at Jessa, and it clicked.

“Oh, my God! You’re Grant Hunter’s wife.”

Jessa laughed. “I am. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Are you vacationing in Clifton?”

“We live here. Grant was born and raised in Clifton. Kay is from Kalispell.”

“I didn’t know that about Grant. I loved his music. I miss hearing him.”

“He still writes, but he loves working on the ranch. We’re going to look around. You have some beautiful pieces. I love handblown glass.” Jessa glanced around.

“My uncle is the glassmith.”

“He’s amazing.”

“Yes, he is. Take your time, and if you need anything, just ask.”

Kay and Jessa smiled at her and wandered around the store. Kay bought a large, solid glass fish with blue, green, and white weaving through the glass.

Shay wrapped it for her, placed it in a bag, and handed it to her. She couldn’t believe one of the biggest country singers was in her shop. *And she bought something!* Shay grinned. It took little to entertain her.

After they looked around a little more, Jessa and Kay waved and walked out. Meeting them was the highlight of her day... so far. Wes was always the highlight of her day.

The day had gone relatively quickly. She looked at the clock to see it was almost closing time. She was so glad. Her feet were killing her today, and she wanted to go home and relax. Wes would be here soon to pick her up. She was heading to the back room to get her purse out of the safe when the bell rang, announcing a customer. With a sigh, she turned around, entered the showroom, and halted in her tracks when she saw Grant Hunter walking around. She widened her eyes, then blinked them several times to make sure she wasn’t imagining things. He looked at her and grinned.

“Hi,” he said, walking toward her and putting his hand out.

Shay stared at him, glanced at his hand, then back at him, until he raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, hi. Hi, Grant. Mr. Hunter. Uh...”

“Please call me Grant. What’s your name?”

“Shay Rogers. Well, it’s really Shaylyn, but no one calls me that. Only my father when I was in trouble. You know how parents can be. He’d just have to yell, *Shaylyn*, at me. I guess they do that to emphasize how much trouble you’re in. Anyway, everyone calls me Shay.” *Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!*

“I see.” He bit his lip, tipped his head down so his hat covered his face, and she knew he was trying not to grin.

When the bell jingled again, Shay looked to see Wes enter, and she wondered what he’d think when he saw *Grant Hunter* was in her shop!

“Grant, how are you?” Wes asked as he shook Grant’s hand.

“Hey, Wes. I’m good. How about you?”

“Great.” Wes looked at Shay. “I wanted to see if you wanted to grab dinner at the diner before heading home.”

Shay looked at Wes, then Grant, and back at Wes.

“You know Grant Hunter, and didn’t tell me?”

“I’m not sure when it would have come up in conversation.” Wes grinned when Grant chuckled.

“Good to know you aren’t talking about me.”

Wes shrugged. “What’s there to talk about?”

Grant laughed, then looked at Shay.

“I’m going to look around. I won’t take long. My wife loves this stuff, and she told me she stopped in earlier. She didn’t say any certain piece was a favorite, but she collects vases.” He glanced around. “I can see there is a lot to choose from.”

“What’s her favorite color?” Shay asked, still finding it hard to believe he was in her shop.

“Purple.”

“Okay. That narrows it down.” She walked to a glass display shelf and lifted a vase with white and purple swirling through it. She showed it to Grant.

“That will work.”

“Is it her birthday?”

“Nope. I just wanted to get her something.”

“Still spoiling Jessa, huh, Grant?”

“I always will.” Grant smiled.

Shay wrapped the vase in tissue paper, placed it inside a bag, ran Grant’s credit card, and handed it back to him. He signed the receipt, picked up the bag, nodded, shook Wes’s hand, and walked out.

When she continued to stare at the door, she heard Wes clear his throat, and she looked at him.

“You know Grant Hunter. I mean, really know him.”

“I went to school with him.”

“And you never told me.”

“Well, did you tell me about people you went to school with?” He grinned.

“No, but no one I went to school with turned into a country singer megastar.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one.” Wes tilted his head. “He owns the Hartland Restaurant. That’s how I was able to get us in.”

“So, you just... *called* Grant Hunter.” She shook her head.

Wes chuckled. “Yes.”

“Unreal. He seemed so nice.”

“Why wouldn’t he be? He’s a good man, always has been. Can we get dinner before heading home?”

“Yes. I’m ready to close anyway. Let me get my purse, and we can go.” Shay walked to the office, removed her purse from the safe, and returned to the showroom. She stood in the doorway, watching Wes walk around the store. God! He was such a good man. She knew that with all her heart, and she hadn’t known him for long, but she trusted him. That was a good thing, since she was staying with him.

Wes turned, looked at her, and grinned.

“Ready?”

“Yes. I’m hungry.”

“Me too. I skipped lunch, and breakfast was so long ago, I can’t remember what I had.”

“That’s not good. You can’t skip meals.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Shay gasped. “What did you say?”

Wes tilted his head down, then raised it to look at her.

“Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.” She smiled when he chuckled.

After flipping off the lights except for the small one behind the front counter, they walked out. Shay stopped to lock the door, and they headed for the diner.

She was happy when Wes moved to the outside of her like a man should.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked.

“You. Some men nowadays don’t know it’s proper for a man to walk on the outside of a woman on a sidewalk.”

“My mama would tan my hide.”

“I doubt that.”

“Okay, maybe not that, but it would probably be easier taking that over the words she’d used to tell me how I did wrong.”

“I think I like her. She raised you right.”

“Yes, and so did my dad.”

Shay nodded. Wes took her hand as they walked along, passing people and smiling. They reached the diner, and Wes opened the door for her. She smiled, entered the restaurant, and laughed when people called out and waved to them.

“God, I love this town.”

“I’m glad to hear that, darlin’.” Wes led her to an empty booth. He removed his hat, hung it on the peg on the side of the booth, and waited for Shay to sit before he did.

“Does this place ever slow down?” She slid into the booth.

“A little between two and four, then the dinner crowd is here.”

“I’ll remember that. Maybe I could beat the afternoon crowd.”

“Yeah. From five until one, it’s packed for breakfast and lunch.”

“Five? In the morning?”

“Of course. This is a ranching and farming community. We’re up before the sun, and Connie makes sure she has breakfast ready.”

“She is an amazing woman.”

“Yes, she is.”

Once a server took their orders, Shay glanced around the little restaurant. She loved it here. She looked across the table at Wes to see him staring at her. The heat poured into her cheeks, and he raised an eyebrow.

“You’re blushing? Why?”

“The way you look at me,” she said.

“Like how?”

“Like I’m the only woman in the room.”

“To me, you are,” he murmured.

“Wes...”

“I’m just being honest, Shay.”

“I know you are, and that’s what makes it so nice. Tell me about your family,” she said.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Is Warren your only sibling?” She shrugged.

“Okay. Yes, Warren is my only sibling. Our biological father died in a car accident when I was an infant, and Warren was two. We don’t remember him, but Mom told us all about him. She married Robert Coleman when I was two, and Warren was four. He adopted us. The ranch belongs to him, but he intends to hand it down to us. Like the song says, I hope I’m half the man he didn’t have to be.”

“That’s great that he loves you and your brother as his own.”

“I couldn’t love him more if he were my biological father, and I know Warren feels the same. Everything we know about ranching was passed to us through him.”

“That’s amazing. How old are you and Warren?”

“I’m thirty-seven and he’s thirty-nine.”

“Tell me about Warren.”

Wes frowned. “Why?”

Shay grinned. “Because he’s hot.”

“*What?*”

She laughed. “Well, he is, but so are you. I’m just curious about your family.”

“Not much more to tell. We’re close. We always have been. He operates the business side, and I run the ranching part. It works well for both of us.”

“You seem happy with it.”

“We are, but we also know we have to keep the ranch going. It should be passed down through future generations, and it won’t be if we don’t get married and have kids to pass it to.”

“I don’t know much about ranching, but from what I’ve heard, it’s a full-time job. Twenty-four, seven. I don’t know how you do it, but you’re used to it since it’s your way of life. I hope you can keep it in the family.”

“Me too. I can’t imagine it being sold.” He shook his head.

She was sure it was constantly on his mind. Since he and Warren were in their late thirties, they had little time. Not that they were old. It was their having to find someone, fall in love, marry them, and have kids. It seemed like a lot to her, and she hoped they kept the ranch.

“There’s a lot of that going on, though, isn’t there?”

“Yeah. It’s a shame. Ranchers and farmers work hard to provide for people, and it’s hard to see them lose their properties. Warren and I will do all we can to keep the ranch in the Coleman family.”

“I hope you do. I’m surprised that neither of you is married yet.”

“Warren was engaged years ago, but it didn’t work out. We haven’t found anyone we’d want to settle down with. We’re so busy, it’s hard to meet anyone.”

“You met me,” she said, smiling.

“Yes, ma’am, and I’m so glad I did.”

“I am, too.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why does a cowboy place his hat upside down when they take it off and set it down?”

“It’s always been that way. There are a lot of superstitions when it comes to a cowboy’s hat.”

“Tell me.” She picked up her drink.

“Well, there’s the one you asked about. If there’s no place to hang your hat, you place it, crown side down, so luck

doesn't run out. It also helps keep the hat's shape."

"But what if you're at the counter?"

"You wear it. If we were at a table, I'd remove it and set it on a seat, but at the counter, since there is no place to set it, you wear it. It's not being rude. You don't want to set your hat on a counter with food. It's just the way it is." Wes shrugged. "Also, if you want to wear something on the hat, like a snake rattle, feather, or other good luck items, it goes on the left side. I've heard it's because the left side is closer to your heart."

"I've heard not to lay it on a bed."

"Yeah, it can bring bad luck, injury, or even death."

"Seriously?"

"These are superstitions that have been around forever. Keeping your cowboy hat off the bed might be the most popular custom, but the most important one is never to mess with another man's hat. Don't touch it or ask to try it on; for God's sake, don't take it off him. Purposely knocking off someone's cowboy hat is a fighting offense. Women, however, have a little leeway. Giving a woman his hat shows a man's attraction. If she takes it off him, she wants to remove more."

Shay smiled. "I'll remember that."

Wes grinned. "I'm sure you will."

"I'm sure manners are in there somewhere."

"Yes. A cowboy hat is iconic. You remove it as a sign of respect during prayer, church, indoor weddings, funerals, the national anthem, and the Pledge of Allegiance. You should also either remove your hat, or touch the brim, when speaking to an elder of the church or meeting a woman for the first time. Tip your hat anytime you'd like to acknowledge and show courtesy to someone."

"I remember you and Warren touching the brim of your hats when Connie introduced us."

"Yes, ma'am. It's how we were raised."

“I think it’s great. I’ve heard cowboys have manners, and you have certainly proven that.”

“My mom would appreciate that.”

“She raised you right.”

“Along with my dad.”

“Yes. It sounds like you have a wonderful family, Wes. I miss my father so much. Some days, it seems like it just happened.”

“When was it?”

“Four years ago. My mother left us right after I was born. I haven’t heard from her, and I don’t care to. Uncle Lou is my father’s brother. They were close, so I became close to my uncle. I love him.”

“He sounds like a good man. I’m glad you helped each other through the pain.”

“He’s coming to see me. Probably within a week.”

“I’d like to meet him.”

“I’m sure he’d like that too.”

Shay tried to keep her mind off Lyle, but it was proving difficult to do. He invaded her thoughts constantly since leaving the note. There was no doubt in her mind that he was still around and watching her and Wes, too.

What had she ever seen in him? The first time he showed her his true ways she should have left, but he convinced her he’d change. He didn’t, but by then, she was so afraid of him that leaving wasn’t an option.

“What are you thinking?”

“About Lyle.”

Wes sighed. “I’m sorry. It must have you on edge.”

“You have no idea. The thing is, if he knows I’m with you, he will do all he can to make your life miserable.”

“He can try. I’m not afraid of him, Shay. He’s no man. A man doesn’t abuse or bully a woman, child, or animal. Not

ever. I'd be more than happy to put him in his place."

"Did you know that one in four women have been victims of abuse, and one in seven have been stalked by a partner? It got to the point where I was terrified of him, and I do believe he'd hurt me in some way if he could. Men are both physically, and mentally abused too, but it's higher for women."

"I can't imagine how frightened you were living with him, but now, he's playing with you. I think we should see Sam as soon as we can."

"All right. Whenever you want."

"Tomorrow. I'm sure he's home by now, or we can go after dinner, and talk to one of his deputies."

"Tomorrow is fine."

Their orders were placed on the table, and they dug in. Shay moaned as the spices from her burger hit her tongue.

"These are amazing."

"I agree. Once we finish, we'll head home, unless you have something you need to do."

"I'm ready to head home. I want to take a hot bath and relax."

"All right."

After eating, Wes signaled for the check, placed a tip on the table, and slid from the booth. He took Shay's hand and they walked to the cash register where he paid for their meals, and walked outside.

"Do you need anything from your apartment while we're here?"

"No. I have to water my plants tomorrow, so I'll check then to make sure." She stopped and looked at him. "How long will I have to do this, Wes? I have my own place and I feel like I'm putting you out."

"You are not putting me out. I suggested it. I want you safe. I know you won't open the door for anyone but what if he's

just hanging around waiting to catch you alone?” Shay shivered at the thought, and Wes put his arm around her. “I’m sorry, darlin’, I don’t mean to scare you, but it’s the truth.”

“I know and I also know you’re right about him. He’ll make his move when I’m alone.”

“So we won’t let you be alone.” He kissed her forehead, and led her to his truck in the parking lot. “Are you sure since we’re here that you don’t want to stop at your apartment. You could go ahead and water your plants while you’re here.”

Shay frowned. “It’s too late to water the plants. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Why is it too late? That makes no sense. We’re here.”

Shay sighed. “They absorb water through their leaves and roots at night. Watering at night allows the water to remain on the plant for longer periods of time, which could encourage bacterial or fungal growth. Just trust me on this.” When he didn’t say anything, she looked at him, burst out laughing, and shrugged.

“I have no idea what you just said, but I’ll take your word for it. Let’s go. You can water them tomorrow... I guess.” He shook his head, making her laugh harder.

The following evening, Wes drove to town to go to the sheriff’s office with Shay. He wanted to speak with Sam himself. He was glad Shay decided to close early today.

After parking in front of her shop, he climbed out, and entered the store.

“Don’t even think of picking that up,” Wes said when he saw her with her arms around a box.

“It isn’t too heavy.”

“I’ll get it.” He walked over to her, lifted the box, and asked “Where?”

“Back here.”

He followed her through an open door, down a hallway, and into the room she pointed out. He set the box down in the corner, and as he turned to leave, ran into a spider web. *Lord! He hated spiders.* Flapping his arms wildly to remove any stuck in his clothing or on him, his hat slipped off and fell to the floor. Somewhere amidst his flailing attempts to rid himself of the eight legged little bastard, he heard Shay laughing, and saw her bent over with her hands on her knees.

“Hey! Do you find this funny?”

She straightened up, and wiped tears from her eyes.

“I didn’t know you were a Ninja Warrior.” She doubled over again in laughter, then straightened up and waved her arms above her head as he had done and howled with laughter.

Wes folded his arms and stared at her. He didn’t think it was *that* funny. So he had a fear of spiders. Big deal. He was sure she had some things that scared her. The more he listened to her laughing, though, the harder it was to keep a straight face. He loved hearing her laugh.

When she looked at him again, and bit her lip to keep from laughing more, he chuckled, and she lost it again. Shaking his head, he walked to her. She looked at him and cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry—”

“Are you? Because for some reason, I don’t think you are.”

She snorted out a laugh.

“I’m really—”

“Nope. You’re not.”

“It’s just that a big man like you afraid of a little spider gets me.”

“I don’t care what size it is. I hate them. I ran into a huge web when I was seven, and I’ve hated them ever since. You know the movie, *Home Alone*? Well, when that tarantula was on Daniel Stern’s face, I had to leave the room.”

“We all have fears.” She chuckled.

“Yeah? What are yours?”

Shay sobered as she thought of her biggest fear, and it was Lyle. She hoped Lyle would never raise a hand to her. It didn’t mean he wouldn’t.

“Mine is of the human kind.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.” He touched her hair.

“It’s all right. Hopefully, I’ll see him coming. Unlike, say... spiders.” She grinned.

“I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Nope.” She laughed.

“I figured as much. Would you like to go to a dance with me?”

“I’d love it. When?”

“This Saturday. The Bur Oak guest ranch in Spring City throws a summer’s end get-together for everyone. It’s always fun. You’ll meet a lot of people. It’s for the last weekend of their season. It’s mostly for the last guests leaving, but the Callahans allow anyone to join. They close until March.”

“I remember you mentioning them. Sounds like fun. Thank you for asking.”

“No problem, sweetheart. We can leave at seven.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Wes grinned, kissed her lips, and after she closed up, they walked out of the store. He glanced up and down the street. Although there hadn’t been anything since the note was left, he knew Newman was biding his time. He was sure that each day that passed made him angrier. His anger would fester until it boiled over and he came after Shay.

Wes would do his best to keep her safe. If... *when*, Newman showed his hand, Wes would be ready. The best thing to do was to let the prick know that he didn’t scare Wes in the least.

He seemed like he thought he scared everyone. He was such a bully that he tried intimidating everyone he encountered. Wes was sure most people walked away from him. Not because they were scared but because they didn't want to deal with him. It was always best to ignore a bully, but he was more than that to Shay. He was a stalker, and they could be very dangerous people.

They walked up the steps to the doors of the courthouse and entered the building. Wes led her down the hallway and stopped in front of the door to the sheriff's office.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Wes nodded, opened the door, and motioned for her to go in, then followed her. He mentally groaned when he saw Betty Lou Harper behind the counter. Everyone loved her but there wasn't much that went on in Clifton that she didn't know about.

"Weston Coleman, what brings you here?" Betty Lou asked him.

"Hi, Betty Lou. Is Sam in? Ms. Rogers and I would like a word."

"Ms. Rogers?" Betty Lou frowned and stared at Shay.

"Shay is fine."

"I'm Betty Lou Harper, Sam's dispatcher and I'm also his godmother."

Wes grinned. Betty Lou always had to throw in that last part.

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Harper."

"*Pffft*, call me Betty Lou. I'll get Sam." She stood, looked toward the hallway, and shouted. "Sam!"

Shay glanced at Wes, and he could see she was trying not to laugh as she widened her eyes.

"Damn it, Betty Lou," Sam Garrett said when he entered the lobby.

“Weston and this woman want to talk to you, and stop swearing.”

When Sam rolled his eyes, Wes chuckled.

“Hey, Sam.”

“Wes, you and Ms. Rogers, come to my office.” Sam turned and headed back to the hallway.

Wes took Shay’s elbow, touched the brim of his hat at Betty Lou, and followed Sam. They entered his office and Sam nodded for them to sit, as he closed the door, then sat behind his desk.

“What’s going on, Wes?”

“We wanted to let you know that Newman left a note on Shay’s car.”

Shay opened her purse, removed the note, and slid it across the desk. Sam picked it up and Wes saw him clench his jaw. Sam’s wife, Tessa, had been physically abused by her ex-husband, and Sam put a bullet between his eyes. The man deserved it.

“Is this the only thing you’ve gotten?” Sam asked Shay.

“Yes, but I know he’s... waiting.”

“I’m sure he is. I just want to know everything he does. I hate a man who abuses, women, children, and animals.”

“Same here. He was never physically—” Shay stopped when Sam raised his hand.

“It doesn’t matter what type of abuse it was. Abuse is abuse.”

Wes took Shay’s hand and held it while she nodded. He knew this had to be tough on her. It had to be. For one, she probably thought no one believed her and that’s why some women didn’t report it. The other reason is the women were too afraid of what the man would do if she did. Wes tightened his jaw. He’d love to have Newman in front of him right now. He could feel Shay shaking as she clung to his hand.

“I agree, Sam. Shay’s staying with me for now. We know he’s watching her and waiting for an opportunity to get her alone. I don’t think he’ll go into her store, but if he’s as cocky as Shay says he is, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Yeah, he sounds like a real ass. I’ve dealt with a few of them in the past.”

“It’s more common than people realize. I never thought I’d be an abused woman,” Shay said, choking on the words.

“We get that, Ms. Rogers. My department will do all it can to protect you. I think it’s a good idea to stay with Wes for the time being. Let’s see what else this coward does. I don’t think he’d hurt you in broad daylight, but you never know. I’m not trying to scare you. I’m trying to prepare you for what might happen. I’m going to make a few calls and see if I can find out anything about him. In the meantime, go about your business, but be cautious. I’ll have a deputy check on you during the days.”

“I’d like that, Sheriff.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Wes stood, helped Shay up, shook Sam’s hand, and they walked out.

“Can we stop at my apartment? I need to get a few things. I should have gotten them when I watered the plants, but really didn’t think about it.”

“Sure, we can do that.” He closed the door after she climbed inside the cab. He strode around the front, opened his door, and slid onto the seat. After starting the truck, he drove out of the parking lot, and headed for her apartment.

Parking beside the steps, he looked at her. He took a few strands of her hair between his fingers and when she looked at him with tears in her eyes, he pulled her out of the seat and onto his lap. He kissed her forehead as she sobbed.

“He will not hurt you if it’s in my power.”

“I know. I’m just so scared of what he could do.”

“I won’t let him do anything, Shay. As long as I’m around, he won’t bother you. He has to know you’re not staying here and I’m sure he’s looking for you, or, I hate to say it, found you and is just waiting for an opportunity. I won’t let that happen.”

“You can’t be with me twenty-four, seven, Wes.” Shay slid back to her seat.

“I don’t have to be. Sam will have his deputies check on you during the day, and then I’ll pick you up and take you home.”

“What if he comes on your property?”

“I’ll shoot his ass. Seriously, do you think he has the balls to do that?”

“I think he believes he can do whatever he wants and damn the consequences.”

Wes opened his door, stepped out, and looked across the seat at her.

“I hope he tries.” He slammed the door shut, walked around the truck, and opened her door.

Chapter Five

Shay sighed, stepped from the truck, and they walked up the steps. When a noise came from the alley, she froze.

“It’s fine,” Wes said.

“No. This is the second time I’ve heard something when coming here.”

“I’ll check it out while you pack some things. I’ll be right up. Go.”

Shay nodded, then ran up the steps. At the stoop, she watched Wes walk up the alley and disappear. She shivered just thinking about Lyle being out there. *Waiting.*

She opened the door, stepped inside, closed it behind her, locked it, stepped back, and stared at it. She couldn’t stop shaking. She couldn’t remember a time when she had ever been this scared of him. It was because she had... *disobeyed* him and left.

She jumped when a knock sounded at the door, then Wes’s voice came through.

“Shay? Darlin’, it’s me. Open up.”

Shay unlocked the door, pulled it open, and he pulled her into his arms.

“I didn’t see anything other than a trash lid on the ground. I don’t think it was him. Probably a cat or something.”

She put her arms around his waist and clung to him.

“I was just thinking that I’ve never been this scared of him.”

“Because you left him, Shay. That was a blow to his huge ego.” Wes leaned back and looked into her face. “Go get what you need, and we’ll head home.”

“I should tell Connie. I don’t want her to think I don’t want to be here.”

“She’ll understand. Her niece, Rissa, lived here when a man from her past came after her. That’s what all the locks are for.”

“I wondered about that.”

“Sam finally ran him out of town, but not before Rissa’s fiancé, Reece, kicked his ass.” Wes grinned. “It was great.”

Shay laughed. “Of course a man would think it was great.”

Wes chuckled. “Hey, he deserved it.”

“Sam mentioned several times he’d dealt with it. Do you know who else?”

“Well, his wife, Tess. She ran from her ex and hid for almost two years before he found her. He tried to take her with him one night, and Deputy Brody Morgan was with her. He shot Brody. He would have killed him if Sam hadn’t shown up. He shot him when he saw he was going to shoot Brody again.”

“Was the deputy, okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine now. There was also Piper. She’s Sawyer Griffin’s wife now. Her ex was a real gem. He beat the hell out of her. He found her after she left him. JoJo Flynn’s ex came back for her too, and Kelsey Wolfe was stalked, but he was caught before he could find her. I’m sure her husband, Ryder, would have kicked the shit out of him. Domestic abuse happens way too often.”

“I met JoJo. She came into the shop.”

“She’s a wonderful person. I’m good friends with her brother, Liam.”

“Oooh, Liam. I like that name.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he muttered, making her laugh.

“Any others?”

“Mary Baker was probably the worst. Joe Baker would beat her to the point her eyes were swollen shut. He was the town drunk, and Sam had a lot of run-ins with him. Mary killed Joe when he started beating on her in the barn. She had her gun

with her in case of snakes. Joe went after her and she shot him in self-defense. Sam refused to charge her. He said she did everyone a favor by killing that bastard.”

Shay shook her head. “No one knows how often it happens. Even men are abused.”

“I know. Shay, darlin’, I won’t let him near you. I believe you’re safe during the day, and at night, you will be with me.”

“I know and that makes me feel better. I just hate putting you out.”

“Baby, how many times do I have to tell you? You’re not putting me out. I’d rather you be safe, and with me, you are. If it’s all right, I’m going to let Warren know. I’ll even tell the men to keep an eye out for any strangers, but I won’t tell them why.”

“Okay. That’s fine.”

“Good. Get your things, and let’s get out of here.”

Shay walked to the bedroom, picked up a suitcase, and threw some clothes and items into it. She hated this. Damn Lyle Newman for making her life miserable.

As they drove along the two-lane road, she kept glancing around. Not that she could see much, but she sure felt better. When she glanced into the side mirror, she saw headlights behind her, and stiffened up.

“Relax. It’s not him.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he doesn’t have the balls to follow us. You, maybe, but not us. He knows you’re with me and he isn’t going to try anything. I promise, it’s not him.”

She looked into the mirror again, and saw the vehicle pull into a road. She sighed with relief.

“He has me on edge.”

“I’m sure he does. I won’t let him touch you.”

“Thank you. This relationship sure turned, didn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“It started out well, but now, it’s more of a protection detail for you.”

Wes grinned. “No, it’s not. Any real man would want to protect a woman. I know he scares you, but he doesn’t frighten me. I’m not afraid of a man who treats a woman in that manner. In *any* bad manner. My mother raised me and Warren to be respectful of women, and she would tan our hides if we weren’t.”

“I should have left a long time ago.”

“You were scared, Shay. I’m glad your uncle helped you leave. I’m sure he doesn’t like Newman either.”

“No. Uncle Lou despises him. He even stood up to him one time, and Lyle backed down. It was then I knew I had to go. I was afraid what he’d do to not only me, but my uncle.”

“Obviously, your uncle wasn’t worried.”

“Not at all. He said the same thing you did. He’d back down from a man.”

“I’d love to find out.”

He drove up to the house, parked, and helped her with her bag. They entered the house, and headed to the bedroom. It had been such a long, stressful, day and Shay was ready to go to bed, after a bath.

“Is it all right if I take a bath?”

“Of course. You can do whatever you want. Make yourself at home.”

“Okay. I’m just so tense.”

“Go relax, baby. I have to check the horses, then I’ll be back.” He kissed her lips, walked out the door, and closed it behind him.

Shay walked to the bedroom, entered the master bath, turned on the water, and stripped. Then she stepped into the tub, and sunk into the warm water. She sighed as she leaned her head back against the tub.

A little while later, she jerked when a knock sounded at the door. She glanced over her shoulder to see the door open, and Wes stuck his head around it.

“Are you okay?”

“I feel wonderful. How long have I been in here?”

“About twenty minutes. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Yes. Did you get the horses checked?”

“Yeah, they’re fine.”

“I’ll get out now.” She stared at him and watched his eyes roam over the water gliding down her body.

When his eyes met hers, she smiled, and watched him close his eyes for a few seconds, then he opened them and stared at her.

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Oh, I am. If there’s one thing that can take my mind off Lyle, it’s you.”

Wes stepped into the bathroom, grabbed a towel, and held it for her. She gazed at him as she stood, and his eyes followed the water sliding off her. He stepped closer, wrapped the towel around her, and lifted her onto the rug, then dried her off.

As he ran the towel over her body, the hotter she got. When he dropped to his knees, she placed her hands on his shoulders, and gripped them when he leaned forward, kissed her curls, and then ran his tongue through them. Shay moaned. She gulped in air as her orgasm hit her and she cried out. Her knees buckled and she would have fallen if Wes hadn’t caught her. He stood, cupped her face in his hands, and pressed his lips to hers.

“Do you see how good you taste?” he murmured against her lips.

“Wes,” she whispered.

“Let’s go to bed. I have to get up early.”

“I can drive myself to work, Wes.”

“I know you can, but I don’t want you to. I have no problem taking you to your shop.”

“But it takes away from your day.”

“What? Twenty minutes? Ten minutes in and ten back. It’s fine, Shay.”

“All right.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I owe you.”

“Damn right, you do, but it can wait. If I don’t get to bed, my ass will have to be tied to the saddle.”

She laughed. “Somehow, I doubt that. I bet you’re an excellent horseman.”

“I’ve been riding on my own since I was five. I had a pony.”

“Of course you did. Is your brother just as good?”

“He is probably the best horseman in the area, and everyone knows it. That man is one with his horse,” Wes said as he stripped off his clothes.

“I love seeing someone ride.”

“Do you ride?”

“Never been on a horse in my life.”

“I could teach you.”

“I’d love it, if you wouldn’t mind teaching me.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t mind.” Wes led her to the bed where the sheets were turned down and motioned her to get into bed. She did, and he crawled in beside her. He tugged her close, placed his cheek on her head, and they fell asleep. She was never safer than in his arms.

The following morning, after dropping Shay off at her shop, Wes drove back to the ranch and parked at the barn. He entered, made his way to the indoor corral, and watched the men working with a horse.

“Wes.”

He glanced over his shoulder to see his brother sauntering toward him.

“Hey, Warren. What’s up?”

“Not much. I’m going for a ride, so I’ll check the fence along the west pasture.”

“Okay. Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.” Warren frowned but they walked to the office in the barn, entered, and sat on the sofa. “Something wrong?”

“Not with the ranch.” Wes explained about Shay and watched Warren clench his jaw.

“Bastard.”

“Yeah, he is, but she’s safe with me.”

“You do what you have to do to keep her safe, Wes. I do agree with letting the men know to keep an eye out, but they don’t need to know why, we don’t need Shay’s business all over the place. But I do think we should let Maverick know. He keeps an eye out for everything.”

“I agree. She’s terrified.”

“I’m sure she is, but she’s safe with you, and I’ll do all I can too.”

“I knew you would. Thanks, Warren. I’d better get back. I’ll let the men know. Have a good ride.”

Warren stood, nodded, and walked out of the room. Wes sat on the sofa, wondering how Shay was doing. He was taking her to the dance tomorrow night, and he hoped it would help her relax.

At seven the next evening, Wes paced in the living room as he waited for Shay. Why did women take so damn long to get

ready to go somewhere?

“I’m ready.”

He turned to look at her and clenched his jaw to keep it from dropping open. She wore a white dress with blue flowers on it. The top was tight around her breasts, and her cleavage was making him salivate. The skirt flowed around her knees from a cinched waist. On her feet were cowboy boots with blue stitching, and she looked beautiful.

“You look amazing,” he said as he strolled to her.

“Thank you. You said it was casual.”

“It is.” He stared into her eyes.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Want to stay home?”

“No. I never get out. I want to dance and have fun.”

“I’ll slow dance but on fast ones, you’re on your own.”

Shay laughed. “No problem. I’m sure there will be line dancing. Is the band live?”

“Yes. It’s a great band too. They play there every Saturday night during the season. On the off-season, sometimes they play at Dewey’s.”

“I can’t wait. I need this.”

“I know you do, baby. We’ll have a good time. Let’s go.” He took her hand, led her through the kitchen, then out the door to the truck.

An hour later, Shay collapsed into the chair at the table after being in a line dance. She smiled as JoJo and her fiancé, Brett Watkins moved around the dance floor.

“I’m sorry I don’t fast dance,” Wes said.

“Oh, it’s fine. A lot of men don’t. Brett sure can dance.”

“He’s good. I’m sure Devin Callahan will be out there soon. Liam too, if he shows. They’re both good too.”

Shay nodded, picked up her drink, and sipped from it. She was starving.

“I’m hungry. Can we hit the buffet?”

“Of course. I was waiting for you.”

She stood and Wes did too, then they made their way to the buffet. After filling their plates, they walked back to the table, sat, and dug into the food.

Shay glanced around and loved how the place looked. Bare light bulbs on wires hung from the rafters, hay bales sat along each wall, the cloth covered tables were close to the entrance, and the stage for the band was at the opposite end. A large parquet floor sat in front of the stage for dancing. The bar and buffet were beside the stage. The barn had the sweet smell of hay along with the aroma of mouthwatering food.

“This place is amazing.”

“It packs them in every year. Guests must stay a minimum of a week. Some stay longer.” Wes grinned when he saw Willa, Devin’s wife, and Presley, Jaxon’s wife talking together. “And some never leave.”

“What?”

He nodded his head in the women’s direction.

“Those two. The blonde, Willa, is Devin’s wife, and the other woman, Presley, is Jaxon’s. Willa came here with her boss, Rocky Fontaine, and fell in love with Devin—”

“Rocky Fontaine? The actor?”

“Yeah. Willa was his assistant, but she fell in love with Devin. She left when Rocky did, but Devin followed her to California and convinced her to return with him. Presley was here on vacation when she met Jaxon. They’re all happy.”

“Was Willa involved with Rocky?”

“No. She just worked for him. He was here to learn how to ride a horse for the western he did.”

“I saw that. It was great. I thought he rode very well.”

Wes chuckled. “He’d never been on a horse in his life, but Devin taught him well.”

“He sure did.” She dug into her potato salad. “This food is so good.”

“They have a good thing here. Every summer, it’s packed.”

A while later, the band played, *How Do I Live*, a Trisha Yearwood song. Wes stood and put his hand out to her. She placed her hand in his and followed him to the dance floor. She turned into his arms and sighed when he pulled her close. This is where she wanted to be.

Wes pressed his cheek to her head as they moved in time to the music. Was he getting too attached in their short time together? They’d only been seeing each other for a couple of months, but he knew he wanted her in his life. He suppressed the thought and enjoyed the moment, not wanting it to end.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Wes asked.

“Yes, thank you for bringing me. Everyone has been so kind.”

“I’m glad you got to meet some people.”

After the song, they returned to the table when Sam and Tess approached them.

“Hey, Wes. It’s nice to see you,” Tess said with a smile, glancing between him and Shay.

“Hi, Tess. This is Shay Rogers, my date. Shay, this is Dr. Tess Garrett, she’s the local vet, along with being Sam’s wife.”

Shay shook her hand. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Would you like to join us?” Wes asked.

Sam glanced at Tess, who nodded with a little smile.

“I’d love that,” she replied.

They settled at the table, and the conversation began flowing. Wes picked up his beer, took a swig, and glanced around. The place was terrific, and the Callahans ensured no one left without having a good time and a full belly. The band was great, and the food was even better.

It had been a while since he’d attended one of these dances, but he was thankful that he chose to bring Shay. She seemed to be having fun, and it was obvious that she and Tess would quickly become good friends. Wes couldn’t help but smile when he heard her laughing at something Tess had said. He was happy to hear her laugh. She was under so much stress right now.

When Brett, JoJo, Liam, and Siobhan headed their way, Wes stood up and introduced them to Shay. It was easy to see that the women were getting along, but he noticed that Shay kept looking around nervously. He leaned closer and asked if she was okay.

“Uh, yeah. I had a feeling I was being watched,” she replied.

He glanced around the room. “I doubt he’s here. If someone is watching you, it’s probably the men here because you’re beautiful.”

Shay blushed at his compliment and kissed him before snuggling against him in her seat.

The band then began playing *Fast As You*, a Dwight Yokum song, and Liam stood up, inviting Shay to dance with him. She asked for Siobhan’s approval before accepting his offer, which Siobhan gave with a laugh and a warning that he’s good at dancing, as well as everything else. Everyone laughed at the joke, and Shay went off to enjoy her dance with Liam. Wes watched them spinning around together and grinned, hearing her laughter echoing throughout the barn.

Shay was sure she'd be sore tomorrow from all the dancing, but she was having so much fun, and Liam Flynn could definitely move. She couldn't keep the smile off her face as he spun her around the floor.

After the music stopped, Liam brought her back to their table, and held the chair for Shay as she sat and tried to steady her breath.

"You two looked like you were having fun out there," Wes remarked.

"I was. Liam's an incredible dancer, not to mention drop-dead gorgeous."

"Hey, what am I? Chopped liver?" Wes joked.

Shay laughed. "You know you're handsome too."

Wes shrugged, but smiled. "Just don't try to run away with him."

"Liam's married and madly in love with his wife," Shay said, nodding at the couple, who had their heads together, whispering.

"He's a damn good man, and there are plenty of those around here," Wes said.

Shay sighed in contentment. "I truly hope I never have to leave this place."

"Don't worry, Shay; I won't let him run you off," Wes replied.

"He'll certainly try," Shay murmured.

"And we'll all be ready," Sam added.

JoJo spoke up then. "My ex came here trying to intimidate me."

"What happened?" Shay asked.

JoJo shrugged. "It got pretty heated until Nevada showed up."

"Nevada Shelton?" Wes asked Sam.

Sam nodded. “As soon as JoJo’s ex shot at Nevada, that alone was enough to arrest him—add in the stalking, and he’ll be gone for a long time.” He shook his head in disbelief.

“He was an ass. I enjoyed kicking the hell out of him,” Brett said.

“Yes, I don’t like trouble in my county.” Sam looked at Shay. “We’ll do what we can for you. If he’s like the others, he’s a pussy, and taking him down a peg or two needs to happen. Trust me, we’ll be watching.”

“I appreciate it,” Shay said nervously as she wrung her hands together. Tess placed her hand over Shay’s.

“My ex-husband found me after two years,” Tess said. “He was not happy, but when he shot Brody, one of Sam’s deputies, Sam shot Ryan and killed him on the spot. It was terrifying when he found me.”

“It must’ve been a relief to have Sam there to protect you,” Shay replied, looking over at the sheriff, who shrugged and smiled.

“That’s a story for another time,” Tess laughed, resting her head against his shoulder. “I’m so glad you forgave me,” she added.

“How could I not, angel?” Sam kissed her forehead.

Wes winked at Shay, who smiled and kissed his lips.

She knew then that she never wanted to leave this town or the man beside her. She was falling for him faster than she’d expected, but without an ounce of fear; she trusted Wes with all her heart. She also loved this town and the people in it.

Shay couldn’t help but grin as they drove back from their night out.

“I had a really great time. Thank you,” she said.

“No problem at all. I’m glad we went,” Wes added.

“Me too. Tess, JoJo, and Siobhan are so amazing. Tess asked me to go out with them the next time.”

“And leave me alone?” he questioned in faux hurt before smiling.

Shay nodded and giggled. “Yeah.”

Wes chuckled. “I figured that’d happen. Just make sure you come home to me safely.”

“Tess said she would pick me up, so I’ll be safe.”

“Still, if for some reason you need to leave early, call me, and I’ll come get you,” he assured her.

“That’s sweet of you,” Shay whispered, feeling the warmth of his gesture spread through her.

Once he parked beside the porch, she smiled knowingly at him. He smirked in response before getting out of the truck. He walked around to her side, opened the door, and held his hand out to her. She turned on the seat, hooked her legs around his waist, and pulled him close, kissing his lips passionately. He moved his lips across her cheek and gently bit down on her earlobe, then whispered to her.

“I want you so much, Shay. I don’t think I can make it to the house.”

“Right here then,” she said as her hands unzipped his jeans and reached inside his boxer briefs to clasp him tightly, making Wes moan.

He stepped back from her, removed her boots, and dropped them to the ground. Shay leaned back on her arms on the seat, as they gazed into each other’s eyes. A mischievous smirk crossed his face as he reached under her dress, hooked his fingers around the elastic of her bikini panties, and yanked them down before placing them in the pocket of his jeans.

Shay laughed and scooted closer towards the edge of the seat while looking intently at his attractive face. She removed his hat, placed it on the seat behind her, and crooked her finger at him, making him grin.

“Please,” she murmured as she watched him retrieve a condom out of his wallet, roll it on, and stepped closer to her before entering her slowly. Her legs looped around his waist as

he began thrusting his hips. He hooked his arms under her legs to open her wider as he started pushing inside her more deeply. She grasped onto him firmly and bit down onto his neck when the pleasure overwhelmed her, and she cried out. Both let out laughs upon hearing her cries reverberating off the mountainside. Wes groaned out her name when he followed her over.

She raked her fingers through his hair as they both tried to catch their breaths. Wes raised his head, stared into her eyes, and kissed her lips.

“Let’s get inside. I have to get up in a few hours.”

“I can get you up in a few hours if you want.”

“Stop. Damn, woman. Are you trying to kill me?”

Shay laughed. “I’d never want to do that.”

Wes pulled up his jeans, zipped them, picked her up, and carried her into the house.

“My boots!”

“I’ll come back out and get them.”

“Oh, good. I didn’t want you to leave them there where anyone could find them. I’m sure they’d know why they’re on the ground.” She giggled.

Wes chuckled. “I wouldn’t do that. Although the men would probably be high fiving me.”

Shay gasped. “Shame on you. I am not one of your conquests.”

“No, ma’am. You sure aren’t. You’re so much more than that to me, Shaylyn Rogers.”

“I feel the same about you.” She placed her head on his shoulder as he carried her inside, kicking the door closed behind them.

Chapter Six

On Monday, Shay walked around her store, dusting and rearranging the pieces. She'd sold a lot and she hoped her uncle would be sending her more. She didn't want to run out, but she hadn't realized she'd sell so much. Picking up her phone, she called her uncle.

"Hello, Shay," he said when he answered.

"Hi, Uncle Lou. Are you still coming to Clifton?"

"I should be there tomorrow."

"Great. Could you order some more of your glass work for me? I'm low."

"Is it selling that well?"

"It always does, but this time of the year, there are a lot of tourists, so I've been busy."

"That's good, though, isn't it? I'll stop in the shop when I get there tomorrow. I'll get a shipment out today. I can't wait to see you. I love you," he said.

"I love you too. I'll see you tomorrow."

Once she hung up, she realized that she would have to move back into her apartment since her uncle was visiting. She hated to leave Wes, but she couldn't expect him to let her uncle stay there. He didn't know him. With a heavy sigh, she called Wes.

"Hey, darlin'," he said, and butterflies took flight in her belly.

"Hey, yourself. Uh, I have to move back into my apartment."

"Why?"

She explained about her uncle and heard Wes sigh.

"Okay, I get that. At least you won't be there alone."

“He’s only staying for a few days, but Wes, I think I should go back to my place anyway.”

“Why?”

“I’m tired of hiding. Maybe if he makes a move, he’ll be caught.”

“That makes sense, but what if he tries to take you?”

“I’ll fight back. I never did before because I was so afraid of him, but I’m not going to let him see it. Sam is right. He’s a pussy and maybe if I stand up to him, he’ll back off.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“I won’t go willingly, Wes.”

“I don’t like it, but I can’t make you stay with me. I want you safe, Shaylyn.”

She smiled. She loved it when he called her by her full name, which wasn’t often, so it felt special when he did.

“I will let you know when I’m leaving and when I get home. I’ll drive, but I promise to let you know if anything happens.”

“I want you to call me when you leave, when you get home, and when you go out. Please. I’m not being like him with this. I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

“I will. I’m scared. I’m not going to lie, but I am more tired of being scared than anything else.”

“Okay, baby. I’m with you on whatever you decide.”

“Are you coming into town today?”

“I could. Why?”

“If you do, come into the shop first. I want to show you something.”

“Really?” he murmured.

“It’s not my boobs, Wes.”

“I can’t make it, then.”

Shay laughed. “Typical man. Mention boobs and you get all horny.”

Wes chuckled. “You don’t have to mention anything. I hear your voice and I’m hard.”

She sputtered out a laugh. “You are a crazy man.”

“That I am, darlin’.”

“I wanted to show you a new piece Uncle Lou made. It’s a horse. I’ll show you sometime.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later. Have a good day. Miss me.” He disconnected.

She smiled as she set her phone on the glass case. She would definitely miss him. She did from the minute he left their bed in the mornings, until she saw him again. She was so in love with him, and she had no clue how he felt.

The following day, Shay heard the door open, looked over, and grinned when she saw her uncle enter the store.

“Uncle Lou,” she cried as she ran to him and hugged him. His arms wrapped around her, and he squeezed her tight.

“Shay, it’s so good to see you.”

“You too. You look tired though.”

“I am. I’ve been on the road for weeks for the showings.”

“I thought you were going to quit doing that?”

“Yeah, me too.” He grinned. “I’m giving it some serious thought. My work sells well enough now that I don’t have to do shows.”

“People love your work. I know I do.”

“That’s because I’m your uncle.”

“True, but even if you weren’t my uncle, I’d love the glass you make.” Shay nibbled on her lip.

“What’s wrong?”

“How did you know?”

“Shaylyn Rogers, I know you and something is bothering you. What is it? Is it your new man?”

“Oh, no. Wes is great. Lyle is in Clifton.”

“Are you sure?”

She told him about the note, seeing Lyle, and going to the sheriff.

“I’m glad you went to the sheriff. Have you heard any more from him?”

“No, but I’m sure I will. He’s biding his time. He knows if he waits, it will drive me nuts.”

“Don’t let that prick get to you, Shay.”

“I’m not going to. I’ve been staying with Wes, but since you’re here, I can move back into my apartment.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no. Don’t be sorry. It’s fine. I’ve been thinking about moving back anyway. I want Lyle to know that I am not afraid of him.”

“But you are, honey,” her uncle said quietly.

“I am, but if he thinks I’m not, maybe it will work, and he’ll leave me alone.”

“I had a feeling he’d never stop looking for you. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m all right. I’ve met some other women who have been through it, and the sheriff is having his department keep an eye out. The bad thing is the time of year. There are still tourists here now and he could blend in very easily. The good thing is that most of them have left.”

“I wish I could stay longer but I have a show in Seattle this weekend.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t expect you to babysit me. I’ll be fine.”

“Is your new man a big guy?”

Shay inwardly sighed. *Oh, yes.*

“He’s six-four, and all muscle. Lyle wouldn’t stand a chance. Wes could probably flick him with his fingers and knock him down.”

Lou laughed. “Wonderful. Do I get to meet Wes?”

“Yes, he’s coming to dinner this evening. Well, we’re taking you to the diner.”

“That was something I missed out on when I was here. I didn’t make it to the diner. I heard a lot about it, but I couldn’t fit it in. I’m looking forward to it.”

Shay got him the key to her apartment, and told him where it was. He kissed her cheek, took the key, and walked out. She couldn’t wait for him and Wes to meet later.

Wes parked his truck beside the metal stairs and stared up at them. He hoped this went well. Since Shay didn’t have any family other than her uncle, it was like meeting her father.

He opened the door, stepped out, and shoved it closed. Taking a deep breath, he climbed the steps, and knocked on the door.

When it opened and he saw her standing there, he knew. He was in love with her.

“Hi,” she said with a smile.

“Hi.” He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

“Come in.”

Wes nodded, removed his hat, and entered the apartment. He hung his hat on the hall tree and turned to meet the man Shay thought so much of.

“Uncle Lou, this is Weston Coleman. Wes, this is my uncle, Lou Rogers.”

Wes put his hand out and the man shook it. They stared at each other for a few seconds then grinned.

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” Wes said as he shook his hand.

“You too, Weston.”

“Wes, please.”

“Wes. Call me Lou.”

“Are you ready to go downstairs, Wes?” Shay asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m starving.”

“I am too. I can’t wait to try this diner. It’s all Shay talks about.”

Wes chuckled. “One burger and you’re hooked.”

“I’ve been all across these states, Wes. We’ll see.”

Wes looked at Shay and smiled, making her grin.

“Let’s go then.”

After walking to the front of the diner, they entered, and Lou chuckled when people waved or called out hello.

“Is it always like this?”

“Always. If you came in alone, they wouldn’t have waved, but since you’re with us, you’re one of them. Let’s get a booth.”

The men followed Shay to a booth, and they slid into it. Wes sat next to Shay while Lou sat across from them, and picked up a menu. As he scanned it, Connie arrived at their table.

“Hi, Wes. Shay. Who’s your friend?”

“Hi, Connie. This is my uncle, Lou Rogers. Uncle Lou, this is Connie. She owns the diner along with her husband, Owen.”

“Connie, it’s nice to meet you. I’m anxious to try these burgers I’ve heard so much about.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Lou. What can I get you all?”

After placing their orders, Connie walked behind the counter, pinned the orders to the metal wheel and spun it around.

“This is a great little restaurant.” Lou glanced around.

“It’s the best for burgers, meat and three meals or a quick dinner.” Shay smiled.

“I ate at a restaurant in a town over from here. It was a nice place too. Fancier.”

“The Hartland Restaurant?” Wes asked.

“Yes, that’s it. It has tremendous food.” Lou grinned.

Shay looked at Wes and smiled.

“You’ll never guess who owns it,” Shay said.

“Who?”

“Well, you’re a fan of his music.”

“Be more specific. I like a lot of music.”

“He was a country singer. He retired a while back, and you were disappointed.”

“Grant Hunter?” her uncle asked in shock.

“Yes.” She grinned. “Not only that, but Wes went to school with him. Grant lives in Clifton.”

“Wow. I knew he was from Montana but didn’t know what town. Have you met him?”

Shay could feel the heat on her cheeks but nodded.

“He came into my store. He bought a vase for his wife.”

“He bought my glass?” Lou’s eyebrows shot up.

“Of course. His wife had been in earlier and told him she loved the store, so he came in to buy her a gift. For no reason.” Shay shook her head.

Wes laughed. “He spoils her.”

“As a man should with his woman. Don’t you agree, Wes?”

“I do. I don’t believe you should have to wait for a special occasion to give your wife, girlfriend, or fiancée, a nice gift occasionally.” Wes picked up his water and sipped it.

“If you’ll let me out, Wes, I need to use the lady’s room.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wes slid out, took her hand and helped her up. She smiled at him then walked to the bathroom. Wes slid back into the booth.

“You seem to have made Shay happy. I’m glad to see that.” Lou picked up his drink.

“I’d never intentionally hurt her.” Wes sat back, folded his arms, and stared at him. “Did she tell you Newman was here?”

Lou clenched his jaw and nodded. “Yes. That little son of a bitch needs to leave her alone.”

“I hope I come across him. Do you know about the note he left her?”

“Yeah. Pissed me off. He knows I don’t like him. I wish I could stick around and confront him.” Lou tilted his head. “But I think you’ll take care of that.”

“Damn right I will.”

“You’re in love with her.” Lou smiled.

“No. Yes, but she doesn’t know yet. I’m going to wait to see what happens with Newman. I don’t want her to have too much to deal with right now.”

“Good idea.”

“What’s a good idea?” Shay asked when she returned to the table. Wes slid out and let her take her seat.

“We’re talking about Newman showing up, and Wes taking care of him.”

“I wish he’d just leave.”

“He won’t until he gets closer to you, Shay. You know that as well as I do.”

Shay nodded. Wes watched her nibble on her bottom lip and knew she was worried about Newman. He’d do all he could to get her alone, and Wes hated that she wasn’t staying with him but with her uncle in town, she didn’t have a choice.

After Connie set their meals down, she folded her arms, and stared at Lou. He grinned, picked up his burger, took a

bite, and moaned, making them laugh.

“This is amazing, Connie. Will you marry me?”

“You’ll have to get in line.” Connie chuckled and walked off to help other patrons.

Lou took another bite, then he looked at Wes.

“So, tell me what you do, Wes.”

“I run the family ranch for my father, along with my brother.”

“What type of ranch?”

“Cattle. We have over a hundred thousand acres. I run the ranch part, and my brother, Warren, runs the business side.”

“That’s a big operation.”

“One of the biggest in Montana.”

“What cattle do you raise?”

“Black Angus, Charolais, and Herefords.”

“I’m sure it keeps you busy.”

“Yes, sir. It does.”

Once they finished their meals, they made their way back up to Shay’s apartment and they sat on the sofa and watched TV.

Shay stood, walked to the window, and stared out at the night. She glanced up the street, and back but saw nothing, until she swung her gaze to across the street again. Lyle leaned against a lamp post, staring up at her. When he saw her looking her way, he saluted.

When she gasped, Wes, and her uncle quickly made their way to the window.

“He’s watching me,” she murmured.

“Son of a bitch,” Wes said, then turned and ran out the door. She could hear him running down the steps. She watched Lyle wave at her with a grin, then he ran off down an alley.

She saw Wes running across the street, but Lyle was long gone. Wes ran down the alley and Shay watched with bated breath for him to return. When he did, her knees almost gave out at the relief she felt. He looked up at her, shook his head, then disappeared behind the building. She jumped when he opened the door and entered the apartment.

“He ran off. I couldn’t see in what direction.” Wes raked his fingers through his hair.

“He ran as soon as he saw you run from the window. He knew you were going after him.” Shay shook her head.

“I don’t think he’ll back tonight. I’d better go. I have to get up early.”

“Okay, I’ll walk you to the door.”

Lou shook Wes’s hand.

“I’m glad you’re keeping an eye on my girl.”

“I’ll protect her with my life.”

“I know you will, but he’s going to toy with both of you.” Lou frowned.

“I agree. He has the mentality that he can take on anyone.” Shay frowned.

“I hope he does. It was nice meeting you, Lou.” Wes shook his hand.

“You too. I’m heading to bed. Goodnight.”

“Night, Uncle Lou.” Shay smiled then turned to Wes. “I wish I was staying with you.”

“Are you afraid?”

“No. I miss you.”

“Aww, darlin’, I miss you too.” He kissed her lips. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Goodnight, baby.”

“Goodnight, Wes. Drive safe.”

“Always.” He placed his hat on his head, opened the door, and after nodding at her, walked out, and closed the door behind him.

A few days later, Shay stood behind the counter in her shop and smiled as she observed customers browsing her products. After she completed a purchase, she went to the back to get her bag to have lunch at the diner. She wished Wes was here to join her, but he was tending to cattle and couldn't come into town.

Shay missed him immensely; they hadn't seen each other since their outing with her uncle. If she lived with him, at least she'd get to see him every night.

When Shay opened the safe to retrieve her belongings, she heard the bell ringing, indicating someone had entered the store. She sighed and walked into the showroom to see Lyle standing there. The color drained from her face as soon as she saw him. He must have heard a noise because he turned and flashed an ominous smile towards her.

"Hello, Shay," he said.

"Get out, Lyle," she seethed through clenched teeth.

He laughed and then took a step closer to her. "You've been naughty, Shay."

"Fuck off," she snarled back at him.

"When did you grow a pair?" He folded his arms and smirked.

"The day I left you," she responded without hesitation.

Lyle shot her a menacing look and declared, "You're fucking that cowboy."

"That is none of your business," Shay fired back quickly.

He shouted back in reply, "It is!"

Shay stood behind the counter and tried to stay composed as Lyle strolled around the store.

"You know this place is on your uncle's website, right?"

She didn't reply but instead went to the store phone on the counter near the glass case. Quickly, she dialed nine-one-one, then hung up after just a few seconds. She knew that this would lead to the police showing up soon enough. There was no way Lyle could know she had called them because it would set him off, and it wouldn't go over well. Nothing in this world scared her more than he did.

She jumped when the door opened, and a sheriff's deputy entered. He greeted her with a nod before giving Lyle his full attention.

"Is there a problem here?" he asked her as he stared at Lyle.

"Yes—"

"No, Deputy, there isn't. Is there Shay?"

She gained her courage and looked at the deputy.

"I don't want him here."

"Sir?" The deputy looked at Lyle.

Lyle shifted his gaze from Shay to look at him.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"And why is that, Deputy?"

"Sir, I don't owe you an explanation. I'm asking you... *nicely* to leave. I won't the next time."

Lyle looked between Shay and the officer before responding, fixing her with his gaze. "I was just going to buy something. We go way back, don't we, Shay?"

She slowly shook her head as the deputy stepped closer toward Lyle.

"It doesn't look like she wants your business, and it's within her rights not to sell anything to you. So let's go."

Lyle clenched his jaw before flashing a grin at Shay. "See you soon," he uttered before turning to leave.

“Not in here, you won’t. Don’t you step foot in here again, and I’d better not see you anywhere near her. Got it?” When Lyle didn’t reply right away, the deputy stepped forward and lowered his voice to a menacing tone. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” Lyle headed for the door and glanced over his shoulder at Shay. “You can’t hide forever.” He walked out.

Shay’s legs gave out, and she dropped onto the stool behind the counter.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, thank you, Deputy...?”

“Shelton. Nevada Shelton, ma’am. You’re welcome. I don’t like him at all.” Nevada glanced at the door, then back to her.

“No one does. I was counting on getting help soon. I remembered that someone was sent when somebody calls and then hangs up or says nothing. So I called.” She shook her head in despair. “I knew he would show up here, eventually.”

“I’m sorry you have to go through this. Sam told us at the department about what’s going on with him. During my shift, I’ll be around; after that, some other officer will watch you until you close the shop. Do you need a ride home?”

“No, I drove here, even though I live above the diner.” She smiled faintly.

“My wife used to live there too.”

“Connie was kind enough to let me move in there,” she said, noticing how good-looking Nevada was for the first time, and remembered he was the deputy JoJo had mentioned. “She’s an amazing person.”

“Yes, Courtney also had that experience with Connie.” He grinned. “She really is the best.”

“I’m really grateful for how fast you got here.”

“I just happened to be in the bakery when they got your call; Courtney works there,” Nevada replied.

“I haven’t been in there yet. I’m afraid to.” She laughed, and Nevada chuckled.

“I’m surprised I haven’t gained weight. I’d better head out. Let me give you, my card.” He removed a card from his wallet and handed it to him. “You can call any of those numbers if you need me. Anytime. We’re a small department, but we’ll do our best to keep you safe.”

“Thank you.”

“What time do you close?”

“Four tonight. The rest of the week, I usually close at six, unless I want to get out of here early. Except Sundays, I’m closed.”

“At least it’s still light out. Just keep an eye out and let us know if he does anything at all. I don’t trust him.”

“I know I don’t. Thank you, Deputy Shelton.”

“Nevada. Yes, ma’am.” He touched the brim of his hat and walked out.

Shay put her hands over her face and sobbed. She screamed when her cellphone rang.

“God, Shay, get a grip.” She picked her phone up to see Wes’s face.

“Wes,” she choked.

“Shay? What is it?”

She told him about Lyle and how Nevada had taken care of it, and left after Lyle did.

“But now I pissed him off.”

“I’m coming in there and following you back here. I want you with me.”

“All right.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Okay.” She disconnected and ran to the door to lock it, then sat and waited for Wes. Praying he’d arrive soon.

Wes raced back to the house after Shay's call, desperate to get to her. Thank goodness Nevada had shown up in her store.

He sped along the road, and when the red and blue lights started flashing behind him, he cursed under his breath. Wes pulled onto the berm and exited his truck as Deputy Brody Morgan strolled towards him.

"Wes? You were going a little fast," Brody said.

"I'm sorry, Brody, but Shay called and told me Newman was at her store."

"Okay, let's go then." Brody ran to his cruiser and activated the siren. Wes followed him closely. As they neared the town, Brody turned off the siren, and Wes wondered why. They needed to be there as quickly as possible; he hated the thought of Shay being alone with that man. Wes didn't trust Newman at all.

They both pulled up outside the shop. Wes leaped from his truck, ran to the door, and tried to open it but it was locked. He put his hands against the glass, peering inside for any sign of Shay. He knocked on the glass pane loudly.

"Shay?" he called out.

"Is it locked?" Brody asked him.

"Yes," Wes said, then looked at Brody. "Why did you turn the siren off?"

Brody nodded his head toward the bakery. Wes looked and saw Nevada standing outside it, watching Shay's store.

"I called in, and Nevada told me Newman had left and he was watching the place."

Wes sighed with relief. "Thank God."

He saw Shay come from the back, walk to the door, unlock it, and open it. He stepped inside, pulled her into his arms, and

held her tight as she cried. She was trembling and he wanted to go look for Newman.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you.” He kissed her head.

“I’m so scared. I don’t know what would have happened if Nevada hadn’t shown up.”

“I’m glad he did. I know it’s late in the year now, and everything will slow down, but I still think you should hire someone. You wouldn’t be alone. I’m surprised no one has been interested.”

“I think it’s a little intimidating working around the glass for some people.”

“Add no experience necessary. Maybe people think you need to know what you’re doing with the glass.”

“Maybe. I’ll do that.” She stepped back from him. “In fact, right now.”

Wes watched her remove a Sharpie from her pocket, take the Help Wanted sign from the window, write on it, and return it to its spot. Then she looked at him and his heart broke. He could see the fear on her face and her eyes were red from crying. Never in his life had he ever wanted to kill a man, but Newman was pushing him. He stepped closer to her and put his arm around her.

“If you’re good here, I’ll be on my way. I have to make my rounds,” Brody said.

“Are you okay now, Shay?” Wes asked.

“Yes. Thank you both.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Brody handed her his card. “Call us anytime if you need us. Have a good day. Wes? Slow the hell down.”

“Yes, sir.” Wes saluted then grinned when Brody shook his head and walked out.

“Deputy Brody Morgan,” Shay read from the card. “He’s very handsome too.”

“Too?”

“Well, Nevada. I mean, come on. Either one of them or Sam could handcuff me,” she said with a smile.

“Do I need to buy handcuffs?”

When she laughed, he grinned. He knew she was scared, but since she was teasing him, he knew she was going to be all right. For now.

“Wait. Isn’t he the deputy that was shot by Tess’s ex?”

“Yeah. He’s a good deputy.”

“Let me get my purse. I’m closing for the day.”

“Good. We’ll go to your place, and you can pack a bag.”

“Do you think I should go with you?”

“Of course. Why not? I don’t want you here alone.”

“But if I stay, he’ll see that he doesn’t scare me.”

“Shay, darlin’, he knows he scares you. Being with me or staying alone isn’t going to change that. The thing with being alone, he could stay close to your apartment. You know how dark that alley can be.”

“Now, *you’re* scaring me.”

“Oh, baby. I never want to scare you. I want you safe and you’ll be safe with me. With Brody and Nevada watching during the days, you’ll be fine, but what about at night, when you’re alone? I know Sam will have the other deputies watching you, but they have to keep an eye on the town.”

“I hate putting you out, Weston.”

“You’re not. I wouldn’t have suggested it otherwise. Please. It will make me feel a hell of a lot better.”

“All right. I’ll get my purse.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

While she headed for the back, Wes walked around the store. He hated that Newman had been in here, terrorizing her. Wes clenched his fists, and tightened his jaw. He wanted to kick the hell out of him, and he wasn’t a violent man. He was

a lover not a fighter, but he'd do what needed done to keep Shay safe.

“I'm ready, but not sure I can drive. I'm still shaking.”

“Then we'll leave your vehicle at your place for now. We can get it some other time.”

“Okay.”

Wes turned to look at her and strolled to her. He kissed her forehead, took her hand, and led her to the door. She turned the Open sign over to Closed and they stepped outside. He waited while she locked the door, then he led her to her SUV. After she climbed in, he strode to his truck. He looked across the street, waved to Nevada, then got into his truck and followed Shay to her apartment.

Chapter Seven

Shay stared out the windshield wondering about Lyle. What was he going to do? She knew he'd never leave willingly. He ran his own business so he could take as much time off as he liked. She sighed, and jerked when Wes touched her hand.

"You okay?"

"I will be. I won't let him see that he scares me. I said, fuck off, to him, and he asked me when I grew a pair." She looked at Wes. "I told him the day I left him."

Wes smirked. "Good for you. He was probably shocked at that."

"He, uh, also said, you're fucking that cowboy. How would he know that, Wes?"

"He's guessing. He's seen us together and assumes we're sleeping together."

"We are."

"Let him think what he wants, Shay. Maybe it will make him go away if he sees you're happy without him."

She shook her head. "No. He won't go unless he can get me to go with him."

Wes pulled onto the berm, put the gear in park, and looked at her.

"Please tell me that is not an option."

"It's not. I'd leave first."

"Shay, I don't want you to do that either. You're safer here. This town will take care of you. *I'll* take care of you."

She squeezed his hand. "I'm afraid what he'll do to you."

"There is nothing he can do to me. I'm not afraid of him. He might think he could scare me, but he won't. I want him to

come after me.”

“He’s not interested in going after you. It’s me he wants.”

“He’ll have to go through me.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. What would she do without Wes to keep her safe? Between him, Sam, and his deputies, she shouldn’t worry, but Lyle was not going to back down. Wes was right. Lyle needed to be taken down a peg or two.

“If you keep running, it will never end because that’s all you’ll be doing.”

“I know. I’ll see what happens.”

Wes leaned over, kissed her lips, put the gear in drive, checked traffic, and then drove home.

When he pulled up to the house, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s so nice to be back.”

“It’s nice to have you back. You can stay as long as you need to, sweetheart. I have no problem with that.”

“I like staying here but I have my own place, Weston. I can’t just not live there. Not after I asked Connie about it and she was nice enough to let me stay there.”

“I know, but if you told her what was going on, she’d be fine with it. It’s been empty for a little while, so it’s not like she has to have you there.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“Hey, do you want to go riding tomorrow?”

“Are we talking horses?”

Wes chuckled. “For now.”

“I’d love to go, but don’t you have to work?”

“I’ll be done my chores before you get your pretty little ass out of my bed.”

“You are crazy. Just don’t wake me up.”

“I won’t. We’ll go around ten if you can meet me in the main barn then.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. Let me help you inside, then I have to get back to work.”

“I’m sorry I made you run into town.”

“Shay, you didn’t *make* me do anything. I wanted to be there for you. I just wish he still would have been there.”

“I’m sure you’ll get your chance.”

“Can’t wait. Come on. You can relax for the rest of the afternoon.”

“I hated closing the shop, but I was too afraid to stay there.”

“It’s not a big deal, Shay. You have to feel safe and if you don’t while you’re there, then right here is the best place for you.”

Shay nodded, opened her door, and stepped out. She saw Wes do the same then he removed her bag from the back and followed her up the steps. He opened the door, nodded for her to enter, then he did.

He carried her bag to the bedroom while she stood in the kitchen, not sure what to do. She never took days off unscheduled, and she didn’t like doing it now. She would lose sales and all because of Lyle.

Clenching her fists, she’d love to hit his smug face. She wasn’t a violent person, but sometimes there were people who needed to be put in their place. Lyle Newman was the perfect example of that.

Wes returned to the kitchen, stopped in the doorway, and stared at her. He folded his arms and watched her. Her fists

were clenched, and he knew she was pissed. Good. She needed to be.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She sighed, looked at him, and nodded. She uncurled her fists and smiled at him. His heart skipped a beat looking at her.

“I’m fine. Just angry.”

“As you should be. Keep that anger, darlin’. He won’t know how to act.”

“I will. Are you going back to work now?”

“Yeah, I have to. I’ll be around later, but if you need me, I’ll be in the center barn cleaning stalls at the ranch.”

“Okay. I think I’ll just watch some TV, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course it is, darlin’. You do whatever you want.” He kissed her lips and walked out the door.

As he stood on the porch, he wondered how long Newman would stick around. If he had any idea that Shay wouldn’t leave with him, would he go? Wes shook his head. He doubted it. He didn’t know him... yet, but he would. He’d make damn sure of it.

Wes jogged down the steps, strode across the yard, making tufts of dust waft from under his boots. It was another hot day and working in the barn was going to be miserable, but it had to be done.

He climbed into his truck, drove to the main ranch, parked, and entered the barn. He strolled to the supply room, got the wheelbarrow, rake, and shovel. He placed the rake and shovel in the wheelbarrow, picked up the handles, and pushed it to the first stall. Hell, he was already sweating, and he hadn’t even started yet.

Two hours later, he removed his hat, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped the sweat from his brow. The sweat rolled down his back.

“Wes?”

“Hey, Warren. What’s up?”

“Want to grab dinner later?”

“I can’t. Shay is at the house.”

“Is she okay?”

Wes nodded and told Warren about Newman.

“He’s not going to back down.”

“It doesn’t sound like it. You know I’ve got your back.”

“I know you do, and I might need you, Warren. I don’t know what he’s capable of except spewing stupid lines to try to intimidate a person.”

“Stupid lines?” Warren frowned at him.

Wes chuckled. “Shay said he’ll say things like, I’ll wipe the floor up with you, and I’ll beat you like you stole something. Stupid things that he thinks make him look tough.”

Warren grinned. “You know as well as I do, that anyone who says that shit, is all talk.”

“Yep, and I can’t wait to hear him say it to me.” Wes shook his head. “One punch. That’s all I need.”

“You might get your chance. Well, since you can’t go to dinner, I’ll go to Mom and Dad’s.”

“Okay. I’ll call them later. I want them to know about Shay. In case that jackass tries to come on our property.”

“Do you think he would?”

“I think anything is possible with him. Damn, I hate men like him.”

“He’s no man. He’s a coward who gets his jollies scaring a woman. I’d like to meet him myself.”

Wes nodded. “It will come to a head.”

“I’m sure. I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Hey, would you mind checking on Shay? If you can’t that’s fine. I just want to get this done and not take time away then have to come back to it.”

“Sure. That’s no problem. I’ll go there now.”

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.”

Warren touched the brim of his hat, walked out of the stall, and strode along the barn to outside. Wes heard his truck start and then drive off.

Getting back to work, he finished the stalls, then entered the other barn to stack hay. Another job he hated, but it needed to be done. He wanted nothing more than to take a cold shower. His T-shirt stuck to his back, and a large sweat stain covered the front.

“Damn, it’s hot,” he muttered then chuckled. “You bitch when it’s hot, and you bitch when it’s cold.”

“Talking to yourself?”

Wes glanced over his shoulder to see Maverick Whitaker, the ranch foreman, standing in the doorway.

“I always do. What’s up?”

“Not much. I’m going to send Joe to check the fence along the east pasture.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Not that I know of. Tom didn’t get there today, so Joe can. Tom’s painting the end barn now.”

“Okay. That’s fine. I’ll get with Warren about rounding up the cattle. The hauler should be coming this week.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you later. Call me if you need me.”

“Will do.” Wes nodded, then returned to work. He wondered how Shay was doing. He hated leaving her alone, but it couldn’t be helped. A working ranch didn’t slow down for anything, and he hoped she understood that.

As Shay stood in the kitchen, making a cup of tea, she heard footsteps on the porch and her belly filled with

butterflies thinking Wes had come back. But when a knock sounded, she knew it wasn't him. She crept to the door, peeked out the blinds, and smiled when she saw Warren, and opened the door to him.

"Hi, Warren. Come in." She swung the door open wider.

"Hi, Shay. Thanks." He stepped across the threshold, removed his hat, and smiled. Damn, he smelled so good.

She was in awe of how good-looking he was too. He stood as tall as Wes, and his thick dark hair needed a trim, but it took nothing from his good looks. His green eyes were lighter than Wes's and just gorgeous. There was a little more gray in his sideburns and hair at his temples than Wes, but he was a very handsome man.

"Wes asked me to check on you. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just bored. I'm not used to not doing anything."

"I understand that. Did you need anything?"

"No, thank you. I'm watching a movie and I really shouldn't be watching it alone. It's a scary one."

"Don't watch it then."

Shay laughed. "I love scary movies. This one is making me wonder if I'll sleep tonight."

Warren grinned. "What's the name of it? I like those kinds of movies too."

"It's called, *Don't Blink*, and I don't think I will."

Warren chuckled. "I've seen it. Yeah, it can keep you awake."

"It's those movies where you can't see what's scary, and that makes it scarier. At least to me, it does."

"I agree. It's hard to fight what you can't see." Warren cocked his head. "Are you really all right?"

"Yes. As long as I'm here. I just hate putting Wes out."

Warren grinned. "Shay, if he didn't want you here, you wouldn't be. We'll do what we can to keep you safe."

Shay smiled. "I appreciate it. Thank you for checking on me. I'm sorry it took you away from your chores."

"No problem. I'm done for the day. I'm heading to see my parents." He opened the door. "I'll let you get back to your movie. Don't blink," he teased, making Shay laugh.

"I'll try. Have a good evening, Warren."

"Yes, ma'am. You do the same." He placed his hat on his head, tugged it low, and walked out the door.

What was it about cowboys? She'd never given them a second thought when she lived in New York, but since seeing so many of them in town, she was awestruck by most of them. All the ones she'd met had wonderful manners and not to mention good looks. Oh, she knew there were good-looking men in other states, but throw in the fact that they were cowboys, made all the difference.

She'd always been a fan of western movies, but she saw the cowboys as just characters, but now, she saw them for the hard work they did. Wes was constantly working, and he loved it. She was sure Warren did too, though she wasn't sure of what he did. Wes told her Warren ran the business side of the ranch, but still rode with the men at times, especially on cattle drives.

She'd love to hear more about that. It had to be fun being out there rounding up the cattle, but it also had to take a lot of hard work. Neither Wes nor Warren seemed bothered by that fact. They loved this ranch and who could blame them? Of course, she was sure there were days they didn't want to be outside. Either because of the baking sun, snow, wind, or rain. They worked them all.

After the movie, she decided to see what she could make them for dinner tonight, so she headed for the kitchen and opened the freezer. It had a lot of steaks, hamburger meat, chicken, and fish inside.

Removing the fish, she set it in the fridge to let it thaw then headed for the bedroom. She was going to take a hot bath and relax.

The next day, Shay followed Wes across the yard and had trouble keeping her eyes off his ass in those Wranglers. Cowboy butts drive me nuts, she thought with a grin. That one sure did.

When they entered the barn, she had to blink several times before her eyes adjusted to the darkness, then she followed him through the barn. She smiled as the scent of horses, and sweet hay hit her nose.

“Wait here. I’ll get the tack.”

“Can I help?”

“Sure. Come with me.”

“Like I haven’t before,” she muttered, giggling.

“What?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” She bit her lip when his eyes narrowed as he looked at her, then he shook his head, and entered a room. She followed him and looked around at all the saddles, reins, blankets, and other things that she had no idea what they were.

“Take two of the pads, and these reins,” he said as he handed them to her.

“Pads?”

“Yeah, those there.” He pointed at what looked like short blankets to her.

“The little blankets?”

“Yes. I figured if I called them blankets, you’d be looking for something larger.”

“That’s very true. What are these for?”

“They absorb sweat from the horse’s back from under the saddle.”

“Are they all the same?”

“No. Some are much thicker for longer days in the saddle. We have different saddles for each job too.”

“Seriously? Why?”

“You want a sturdy saddle if you’re going to be out all day. A western saddle is made for that purpose. Western saddles are used for western riding and are the saddles used on working horses on cattle ranches throughout the United States, particularly in the west. They are the cowboy saddles familiar to most people. There’s also a ranch saddle and it’s for the same purpose. Ranch saddles are typically big, heavy, and feature lots of leather. They have sturdy horns for rigorous, everyday ranch work. They have a high cantle for comfort and security.”

“You lost me. Horns? Cantle? Speak English, please.”

Wes chuckled. “The horn is the saddle horn, and the cantle is the back where the saddle slopes upward.”

“I have no clue on any of this.”

“I’ll teach you. Once you get on the saddle, I’ll adjust the stirrups.”

Shay ran her hand over the butter soft leather of the saddle.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It’s a Conway saddle. None better, in my opinion. Noah makes them by hand.”

“Amazing. He does all these designs too?”

“Yeah, it’s all handmade. His name is under the fender.”

“The what?”

Wes laughed. “What the stirrup is attached to. Lift it up.”

Shay did and saw Conway Saddles carved into it.

“I could never do that.”

“It’s a skill for sure. He has a two year waiting list. The only saddles used on this ranch are Noah’s.”

“They’re so beautiful.”

“Remember Scarlett from Dewey’s?” Shay nodded. “Noah is her husband.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I’ll get the horses. I’ll put you on Petunia.”

“Petunia?” she asked with a laugh.

“Mom named her, and we don’t question anything that woman does, or we know we’ll regret it. We keep her happy, so we are.” Wes chuckled.

Shay laughed. “I get that.”

“I’ll be right back.”

She nodded but knew he hadn’t seen her since he disappeared into a stall, but when he came back out, leading a beautiful golden horse, she gasped.

“Oh, my. She is gorgeous.”

“Yeah, and she knows it too, don’t you girl?” He rubbed her nose and Shay laughed when the horse tried to take his hat, but he was too quick and moved back.

“Does she do that a lot?”

“She’s definitely a hat stealer. Other horses will do it too, but she’s the most mischievous. Let me get Ajax, then I’ll get you settled.”

“All right.”

Shay rubbed Petunia’s nose and laughed when the horse blew into her hand. She turned to see Wes leading a gorgeous horse.

“Oh, my God! He’s beautiful, Wes.”

The horse was black with a splash of white on its back, like someone had tossed a can of white paint on the horse. Its eyes were blue and stunning in the black surrounding them. It stood tall, but then it would have to be to hold Wes.

“Thanks. He’s an American Paint.”

“Can I touch him?”

“Sure. He’s gentle until someone other than me tries to get on his back.”

“I’m definitely not trying that.” She touched the horse’s nose. “You are one gorgeous male, Ajax.”

“Shhh, he’s hard enough to deal with.” Wes grinned. “Let me help you get in the saddle.”

“Okay,” she said quietly.

“Shay, sweetheart, if you don’t want to go, we don’t have to.”

“No, I want to. It’s just that I’ve never been on a horse in my life. I love them, but from the ground.”

Wes tilted his head. “Yes, or no?”

She inhaled deeply, nodded her head, and looked at him.

“Yes.”

“That’s my girl. Come here.” He put his hand out for her.

Shay placed her hand in his.

“Okay.”

“Put your left foot in the stirrup, grab the horn, and a little mane, then the cantle. You’ll have to push off with your right foot to get momentum. Once you do, lift yourself up onto the saddle.”

“Oh, yeah, easy for you to say. You’ve probably been riding before you could walk.”

“Almost.”

“Warren’s the same, isn’t he?”

“Yes. As I said before, he’s the best horseman I know. No one can keep up with him. Every year in early September, when the fair is here, there’s a local horse race. He wins every time he enters.”

“I’d love to see that.”

“It’s in about two weeks. We can go if you’d like.”

“I’d love it. Do you race?”

Wes chuckled. “I’m more out for a nice ride. I know I won’t beat my brother. All right, come here and we’ll get you on Petunia.”

She did as he told her and in no time, she sat in the saddle, grinning.

“You look proud of yourself.”

“Well, I made it this far. Now what?”

“Let me adjust your stirrups. Now, Petunia knows commands by your knees. Touch your knee to the side you want her to turn. Both knees will make her go straight.”

“How did you train her for that?” Shay was in awe that someone could train a horse to do that.

“I didn’t. Trick Dillon trained her. Best damn horse whisperer in these parts.”

“It sounds like it. He must be amazing.”

“He is. He has people across the states bringing their horses to him.” Wes stepped back. “How does that feel? Comfy?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Good. Let me get on Ajax, and we’ll go. We’ll take it slow. You’re going to feel it tomorrow.”

“What do you mean? I’m just riding a horse.”

Wes shook his head.

“You’re going to use muscles you didn’t know you had.”

“Like what?” *Did she want to do this?*

“When you’re riding a horse properly, you’ll engage all your core muscles, starting from your abs to your lower back. The only way to ride correctly is with your core muscles activated. Otherwise, your spine will suffer, and you’ll struggle to keep yourself upright. Horseback riding has a similar effect on your core strength as doing ball crunches. It requires a lot of strength and as much patience as balance and coordination do. By balancing, you support your neuromuscular coordination which will result in a stronger core. Since balancing is not easy, it’ll help you burn calories. Since you have to hold your position for an extended period of time, you are basically doing a workout. In the gym, you will be more focused on constant motion, rather than isometric

exercises. Thirty minutes of riding can make your legs burn the same as they would on leg day in the gym. Your thighs will burn during a ride. To keep yourself perched in the saddle, you will sometimes have to squeeze your thighs so hard that it will feel like you have drained every ounce of strength you had. Also, squeezing your legs together, and engaging your inner thigh muscles to make the horse move forward, will target the muscles to make them stronger. Even basic steering requires balancing and engaging your core strength. Your arms and shoulders also have to carry a lot of the load. Although you may not have much pressure on the horse's mouth, keeping your arms elevated, steady and engaged can be surprisingly difficult."

She looked at him, and her jaw dropped. Was he serious? Mentally shaking her head, she knew he was.

"I guess I won't need to work out if I ride more, right?"

"No doubt."

"No wonder most cowboys are in such good shape."

Wes grinned. "We're in the saddle more than we're out of it."

"Wes?"

Shay's eyes widened as she saw a man walking into the barn. He was tall, probably the same height as Wes. His white T-shirt stretched across his muscular chest, emphasizing an impressive set of pecs, abs, and biceps. She bit her lip to stop from groaning. If Wes knew what she was thinking, he wouldn't be happy. But men looked at women all the time, so why couldn't women check out men? Her gaze drifted lower, studying the contours of his jeans. She mentally snorted. Why did she always check out a man's crotch?

"Maverick? Something wrong?"

"No, sir. I wanted to see if you need anything before I head to town for some supplies."

"Not that I know of, but you might want to check with Warren or Dad."

“I’ll do that.” The cowboy touched the brim of his hat when he looked at her and she almost sighed. His hair was dark, except for the gray in his sideburns, hair at his temples, and scruff. His eyes were sky blue. *Whew!* He was devilishly handsome.

“Shay, this is the ranch foreman, Maverick Whitaker. Maverick, this is Shay Rogers.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Maverick.”

“Yes, ma’am. You too. Enjoy your ride. I’ll be back later, Wes.”

“Good deal.”

Shay watched him leave the barn and disappear, but she couldn’t stop staring in his direction until Wes cleared his throat. She looked at him, grinned, and shrugged.

“Sorry, but he’s gorgeous.”

Wes blew out a laugh. “He’s a good man.”

“Is he married?” She bit her lip when Wes’s eyes narrowed.

“No,” he snapped, making her laugh.

“You, Weston Coleman, are too easy to tease.”

“Whatever.”

He finished saddling his horse and Shay’s mouth dropped open when he vaulted into the saddle without using the stirrups. He just grabbed the horn, and swung up there. Unreal!

“I could never do that.”

“It’s a little hard for a novice rider to attempt.”

“I suppose you’re one of those riders who can get off the horse before it even stops, too.”

Wes laughed. “I can now, but when I first tried, I ate a lot of dirt.”

Shay grinned. “I bet. I know I would.”

“Okay, darlin’, let’s head out. I won’t keep you out too long. I don’t want you to get sore. I have some liniment you

can use when we get back.”

“Oooh, will you apply it?”

“Stop. Damn, you’re bad.”

“You love it.”

He looked at her and nodded.

“I do.”

Shay didn’t know what to say to that. Maybe it was just a common comeback, but the butterflies took flight in her belly just thinking he could mean he loved *her*. How in the world would she ever let him know how she felt about him?

If all this with Lyle went away, she’d tell Wes how she felt and damn the consequences. If he didn’t love her, she’d deal with it, but she had a feeling this was the one man she was meant to love for the rest of her life.

“Uh, what do I do to go again?”

“Nudge her with both knees. Easy. She’ll follow Ajax, so relax and enjoy the ride.”

Shay nodded, watched him knee his horse, and she did the same. She smiled when Petunia moved.

“I did it,” she exclaimed.

Wes chuckled. “It doesn’t take much to entertain you, does it?”

“Hey,” she shouted and when he turned in the saddle to look at her, she gave him the finger.

“Maybe when we get back.”

Shay gasped then laughed when he did again.

Petunia followed Ajax as they rode through the pasture. It was a beautiful day, and she was so happy to be with Wes.

Wes glanced around the land. This was his home and he hoped he never had to leave it. He couldn't imagine not being a rancher. It's what he'd been born to do and thanks to his stepfather, he learned it well.

The only thing that would make it complete would be to settle down, have a few kids, and pass his knowledge on to his children. He knew it was what Warren was hoping to achieve also.

He looked over his shoulder to see Shay looking around with a smile on her beautiful face, and it made him grin. She had no idea how sore she was going to be later. For that reason alone, he wouldn't keep her out long.

"Are you doing, all right?"

"Yes. I like this. Your land is so pretty, Weston."

"Thanks. I love it."

"I can tell you do. Oh, I'm going out next Saturday night with the girls. I can't wait."

"You'll have fun. I suppose I'll have to sit home alone while you're out kicking up your heels. Just don't be kicking them up with another cowboy."

"I'm only interested in one cowboy, and I'm looking at him."

When he grinned, she laughed.

"I'll be gone for two weeks soon."

"Are you going on vacation?"

"Vacation? What is this strange word you speak?"

Shay laughed. "Then where are you going?"

"The cattle drive. We want to move them to the north pasture. The men are already rounding them up from the east pasture to get them back here, then we'll move them again once they get back. We like to get them closer to home so we can keep an eye on them in the winter. We're a little late this year moving them, but it needs to be done soon."

“That takes two weeks?”

“It will take us a while even after rounding them up. Taking them up will take longer due to the cattle. We have to stop along the way and let them rest and graze. Coming back is a breeze, even though we still stop to camp halfway.”

“How many men go?”

“Eight ranch hands, a cook, herdsman, and me. Some of the men take their girlfriends or wives along since they’re gone for a while, but no children. It’s too dangerous.”

“Do you sleep in tents?”

“Yes, or under the stars.”

“What about bears?”

“I don’t know where they sleep.” Wes laughed when her eyes narrowed. “We’re close to the woods, so I’m sure they’re out there, though I’ve never seen one. I have seen cougars a few times.”

“I’d be terrified.”

“They usually run. They’re more afraid of you than you are of them.”

“I find that highly unlikely.”

“You could go.” He hoped she said yes.

“I would love to, but what about my shop?”

“Since the B & B will be closing and the Bur Oak already is, there won’t be many customers, but that’s up to you. I understand if you’d rather not.”

“I would love to go. I just need to figure out what to do about the store.”

“Why don’t you see how much it slows down? If it does a good bit, you won’t need to open. Unless you want to.”

“I can close anytime I want. Even Uncle Lou said not to stress over opening every day.”

“Then you let me know, sweetheart. I think you’d have a good time.”

“It sounds like fun, but I’m not chasing cows.”

“Cattle, and you won’t have to.”

“Cows, cattle, whatever.”

Wes chuckled. “Mature female cattle are referred to as cows and mature male cattle are referred to as bulls. Young female cattle, before giving birth, are called heifers. Bulls that are castrated are called steers. *Cattle* refers to all of them.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll never learn that. I’ll sit on Petunia and watch as everyone does their thing.”

“That’s probably best. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“I hope I can go.”

“Not as much as I do.” He nudged his horse and galloped off.

Shay stared after him. She pressed her knees to Petunia, but only in a walk. She could just see herself bouncing out of the saddle if she tried to run the horse. She smiled as she watched Wes riding. He sat a saddle very well.

“Well, of course he does. He was practically born in it.” She gasped when she saw him nudge the horse into a run, and barely moved in that saddle.

That was way beyond her experience, but it made her smile watching him and the horse. He turned the horse around and rode back to her and halted the horse beside her.

“He wanted to run,” Wes said.

“He did, or you did?”

“Both,” he said sheepishly.

Shay laughed. “I’ll never be able to do that.”

“Sure, you will. The more you ride, the more comfortable you’ll feel.”

“I don’t want to fall off.” She looked at the ground. “That’s a long way down.”

“If you haven’t been thrown, you haven’t ridden.”

“Well, that’s comforting. I have that to look forward to. Have you been thrown?”

“Oh, hell, darlin’, more times than I can count. It’s a given.”

“Warren too? You said he was an excellent horseman.”

Wes grinned. “Of course, he has. It doesn’t matter how good you are. If the horse wants you off its back, it will do everything to make that happen. But you get back on.”

“I can’t imagine what that feels like.” She shuddered.

“That ground can be pretty hard. It’s better if it’s snow covered. Softer landing.” He grinned. “I think we need to head back. I’ll get the liniment for you when we do. It will help.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll need it. I’m feeling a little stiff.”

“That’s normal. The liniment will help. It helps relieve pain, soreness, and stiffness as well. Your body will thank you for it.”

“Can I take a bath first?”

“Sure. You can use my jacuzzi. It helps a lot too.”

“Okay. Maybe you can join me.”

“I have to get back to work, but maybe later you could get in it again.” He grinned.

“Sounds good to me.”

Once they got back to the barns, he showed her how to cool the horse, remove the tack, then feed and water the horses. She was very interested in learning and hoped he didn’t mind teaching her more about the ranch.

Chapter Eight

On Monday, Wes called his brother to see if he wanted to grab lunch at the diner. He really wanted to check on Shay and make sure she was okay. He knew Newman hadn't been in because she told him she'd call if he showed up.

"Hey, dinner at the diner?" he asked when Warren answered.

"Sure. I'll pick you up. I have to get dog food."

"Okay. It shouldn't be crowded at this time of the day."

"Yep. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Wes disconnected and called Shay's shop.

"A Touch of Glass, how can I help you?"

"What a question," Wes said, chuckling.

Shay laughed. "I'm surprised you called this phone."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay. I knew you'd answer this one."

"Yes. I have to answer this one."

"Yep, and if he was there, he'd never let you use your cellphone. He knows you would have to answer the shop phone, or it would be suspicious."

"I agree. What are you up to?"

"Six four."

"You're funny."

"I know." He laughed. "Warren and I are going to the diner to eat a late lunch. Do you want to join us?"

"No, as much as I'd love to, I can't. I'm busy today."

"Good. That could keep him out of there."

"I hope so. Are you going to stop in and see me?"

"It depends on Warren since he's picking me up."

“I see. Okay. I’d love to see you if you can.”

“We have to stop at the Feed Store. Warren needs to pick up dog food. So we’ll stop after lunch.”

“Okay. I’ll be here.”

“I’ll hopefully see you soon.” He disconnected.

When he heard Warren’s truck outside, he walked out onto the porch, jogged down the steps, and climbed into the truck.

“Why is it your truck is so clean all the time and not a scratch on it?”

“I take care of it.”

“Bullshit. It’s because you don’t run it all over the ranch.”

Warren chuckled. “Buy a new one. It’s not like you can’t afford it.”

“I don’t want another one. I like my truck.”

“Then quit bitching. Damn.”

Wes chuckled and Warren did too.

After getting the truck loaded with the dog food, Warren drove them to the diner parking lot, found a spot, and shut the truck off.

Wes glanced over his shoulder at the bags of dog food in the bed of the truck.

“Do you think you got enough?” he teased.

“We have ten dogs, you tell me.”

Wes shook his head, opened his door, and they entered the diner to see it empty. Connie smiled as they sat at a table.

“Late lunch today, boys?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll have my usual.” Warren grinned.

“Same for me, Connie.”

“It’ll be right up.” She winked at them and walked off.

As Wes and Warren sat at a table, eating, the bell above the door jingled. Connie came from the kitchen and waited on the

man when he sat at the counter. Wes could hear her talking to him, but couldn't make out what they were saying. She set a glass of water on the counter for him.

"Connie looks a little uncomfortable with that man," Warren said.

"I was thinking the same thing. She's not her usual happy self."

"Who is he?"

Wes watched the man spin on the stool and look at him and Warren, and Wes knew.

"I'd bet money that's Newman."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Call it a hunch, but there's something off about him. He looks different in the photo I saw of him, his hair was shorter, but I'd bet it's him."

When a smile lifted the man's lips before he turned to face the counter, Wes knew he was right.

"I believe you're right," Warren said with a smirk when Newman turned back around and stared at Wes.

Wes stared right back. He folded his arms and never took his eyes off him. Newman stood, grinned, and walked toward them. He stopped beside their table and Wes got to his feet, but Warren remained seated. Wes knew that even though his brother looked relaxed, he was anything but.

"Do I know you?" Newman asked him.

"We've never met, but I'd bet money, you know who I am."

When Newman laughed, Wes gritted his teeth. He really wanted to knock that grin off his face.

"And I'd say you know who I am." Newman stepped closer to him.

“No one important.” Wes smirked. “Why did you run away when Shay saw you from her window?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, sure you don’t.”

“We’re going to have a problem.”

“Why would we have a problem?” Wes raised an eyebrow.

“Because Shay belongs to me.”

“She doesn’t *belong* to anyone. I think you should leave, Newman. I believe we’ve all had enough of you.”

“I’ll kick your ass from here to kingdom come,” Newman snapped.

Wes bit his lip to stop the grin, and glanced at Warren who was also grinning. Wes shook his head.

“You like making idle threats, don’t you?”

“Oh, they’re not idle.”

“Seriously? I bet you want to open a can of whoop ass on me, don’t you?” Wes grinned when he heard Warren chuckle.

“You think you’re funny, Coleman. You don’t scare me.”

“I’m not trying to scare you, but you’re lying. And just how do you know my name?”

Newman shrugged. “A time’s going to come when I’ll be ready to kick your ass.”

Wes did his best not to laugh. He glanced at Warren again, and saw he was having the same problem.

“You have to get *ready* to kick my ass?” Wes grinned when Connie snorted.

Newman stepped closer. “Clock’s ticking, motherfucker.” He tapped his wrist. “Tock’s—” he stopped when he realized what he said, but Wes caught it.

“Were you going to say, *tock’s clicking?*” Wes lost it. He sat and laughed so hard, he had tears in his eyes. He looked at his brother and laughed harder when he saw Warren leaning

his head back, and laughing. Wes laughed until his stomach hurt. He tried to catch his breath, but when Newman stormed from the diner, Wes laughed harder.

He took a deep breath, trying to compose himself, but when he saw Connie wiping tears from her eyes as she laughed, he lost it again. He got himself under control, but chuckled when he watched Warren shaking his head, and laughing.

“Who was that man?” Connie asked them.

“That is Shay’s ex. He’s here to take her back to New York.” Wes shook his head. “She’s not going. He’s not a good person.”

“I usually don’t tolerate arguing or fighting in here, but he needed put in his place.” Connie shook her head, and walked toward the kitchen. “Tock’s clicking,” she said, and laughed. She returned in a few minutes and set their lunches on the table. “On the house. You made my day.”

Wes picked up his burger and took a bite. He mentally shook his head. Damn Newman was an ass, and he did need to be taken down a peg or two, and Wes was just the man to do it.

After lunch, they walked to Shay’s shop and entered. It was packed with people. He saw her talking with a woman, and she smiled when she saw him. He grinned and winked at her as he and Warren waited for her to get a free minute.

Shay sighed when she saw Wes and Warren enter. Every time the chime sounded, she panicked, thinking it was Lyle.

As she helped a customer, she noticed some of the women staring at the two cowboys, and she couldn’t help but smile. She couldn’t blame them. Weston and Warren were exceptionally good-looking men.

“I’ll be right back,” she told the customer, and headed for the men. “Hi. Did you have a nice lunch?”

“The food was good, as always, but Newman showed up,” Wes said.

Shay gasped. “Oh, no. What happened?”

As Wes told her about Lyle and all that had gone on, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Tock’s clicking?” She laughed harder.

“He was trying to act tough, but when he said that we lost it. Even Connie.”

“I love it. I hope he doesn’t come in here.” She nibbled on her bottom lip.

“He won’t. He knows he’s not allowed in here, so if he did come in, he’d be arrested, or Nevada would give him a good scare. How’s your day so far?”

“Good. Sales are going great. I hate to see the summer end.”

“I understand that. It will slow down in the winter months, but next year, it will be back in full force.” Wes grinned.

“I hope so.” She stared into his eyes until Warren cleared his throat.

“We should get going, Wes. We still have work to do.”

“Yeah, okay.” Wes lightly kissed Shay’s lips. “I’ll see you later when I pick you up.”

“All right. Be careful.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Both men touched the brims of their hats and walked out.

Shay watched as they headed back toward the diner, and sighed. She was in so deep. When she turned to head back to the customer, the women in the store were staring at her.

“Lucky you. Having either one of them pick me up would make my day.” A woman smiled and Shay watched as the others nodded their heads in agreement.

When Wes returned later to pick her up, she locked the door, and climbed into his truck.

“Do you want to go to dinner at the Hartland?”

“Can we get in?”

“Being Monday, it’s probably not crowded. We can look, and if we can’t get in, I’ll call Grant.”

“Oh, of course. Just call Grant Hunter, a country music superstar, to get you into his restaurant. No biggie.” She shrugged, then laughed when Wes chuckled.

After driving to the restaurant, they parked and entered. They were shown to a table right away. There was a good crowd, but not packed like the night they’d been here.

“Is a table, all right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wes held the chair for Shay as she sat then he moved to his seat and sat.

Shay hadn’t realized she was so hungry until her food was set on the table. She inhaled the scents and her stomach growled. Wes chuckled.

“Hungry?”

“Yes. I just didn’t know how much until I smelled this place.”

“Well, dig in then. I’m hungry too.” He picked up his fork and ate.

Shay grinned, picked up her fork and dug in. As before, the first bite melted in her mouth. This place had amazing food. She gazed around the room, and the blood drained from her face.

Wes noticed Shay’s face pale as she glanced around the restaurant.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her.

“Lyle’s here,” she murmured. “He must have followed us.”

Wes searched and spotted him striding toward them. He rose to his feet.

When Lyle arrived at their table, he pulled out a chair and seated himself without asking permission.

“I didn’t invite you to join us, Newman,” Wes said as he returned to his seat.

“I don’t need your consent for anything,” Newman replied, looking at Shay. “Is your meal up to par, Shay?”

She cast him a scowl in response.

When he chuckled, the urge to punch him overtook Wes, and he had to clench his fists beneath the table to restrain it. One hit was all that was necessary to get rid of this jerk, but not here. Wes didn’t want any drama.

“Let’s have a conversation outside.” Wes stood again.

“No,” Lyle retorted.

Grinding his teeth, Wes asserted, “That wasn’t a question.”

Newman glared at him before standing. Wes knew everyone there was watching them but wanted him gone from this place.

“A time will come, Coleman.”

“Is the tock clicking?” Wes grinned when Shay snorted out a laugh.

“You’ve never misspoke?” Newman frowned at him.

“Sure, but I never tried to look tough while doing.”

“Fuck you.” Newman stepped closer and so did Wes.

“You think because you can intimidate a woman, it makes you a man. It doesn’t. It makes you a coward. You think it makes you look big and bad.”

“I am big and bad, Coleman.”

“You’re a fucking pussy. Let’s see how big and bad you think you are. We’ll go outside and finish this.”

Just then, Grant stopped beside them and inquired, “Wes? Is there an issue here?”

“We want him out of here,” Wes gestured towards Lyle with a tilt of his head, “He came here to start trouble.”

“Is that so?” Grant asked Newman.

“*Grant Hunter?* Don’t you have friends in high places, Coleman?”

“Get up and leave right now, and don’t you ever step foot in here again,” Grant said between clenched teeth.

“I’m going. I was just talking with an old friend, right, Shay?”

“Wrong. Go away,” she snapped.

When Newman chuckled, Wes was more than ready to drag his sorry ass out of here and make him leave Clifton.

“Sure. I’ll leave... for now.” He leaned down toward Shay. “But I’m not leaving this podunk town without you.”

He glared at Wes, then strode from the restaurant. Wes sighed and turned to Grant.

“Thank you.” He shook his hand.

“I don’t need problems in my restaurant, and I don’t like him.”

“No one does. He’s here for Shay,” Wes said.

“He’s my ex,” Shay said.

“Well, from the looks of it, I’d say you were smart to get away from him. Be careful, though. He doesn’t seem like he takes no for an answer very easily. I need to get back to the kitchen. I’m picking up dinner for us. Enjoy your meals if you can.” Grant nodded, and walked off.

Wes resumed his seat, picked up his fork, but set it back down. He tightened his jaw, and swore.

“He ruined my damn appetite.”

“Mine too. We should just take it home.”

“Yeah.” Wes signaled for their server. “We’d like to-go boxes, and the check, please.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be right back.”

Wes stared across the table at Shay and could see she was trying not to cry. He slid his hand to her, and she clutched it in hers.

“I hate him,” she whispered.

“I’m not too fond of him either. We’ll head home and relax.”

“How am I supposed to relax, Wes?”

“Your usual way. A hot bath. I might join you.” He grinned and she smiled at him.

“I’d like that.”

“Not as much as I would, darlin’. Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you think he’s still here? What if he follows us?”

“Shaylyn, he can follow all he wants, but he’s a damn coward. He’s too afraid to do anything while I’m around. He knows he scares you, but he also knows he *doesn’t* scare me. Anytime he feels he can intimidate me, he can take a shot. He likes making a scene, but he won’t try anything in front of a crowd. That’s why he left so easily, and he only came in because he knew I couldn’t do anything to him here.”

“I don’t want you hurt, Weston.”

“He won’t get the chance.”

The server returned with the Styrofoam boxes and placed them on the table. Wes removed his credit card from his wallet, but the server waved it away.

“Your meals have been taken care of. Enjoy your evening.”

“Thank you.”

“How are the meals taken care of?”

“Grant.”

Wes stood, put his card in his wallet, picked up the bag with their food, took Shay's hand and led her through the restaurant. He knew people were watching them, but he didn't care. He wanted to get her home, so she'd relax. Damn. He wanted to kick the hell out of Newman.

As he led her across the parking lot, he glanced around. If Newman was still here, Wes knew he wouldn't show his face. Not yet, and certainly not to him.

He wouldn't be at all surprised if Newman showed up at Shay's store on Monday. He hoped not, but the man was a coward.

Once he helped Shay into the truck, he drove them home. He noticed she kept glancing into the side mirror, but no one followed them. Just as he thought. Newman was too chicken to face him.

Once Wes pulled the truck to a stop, he heard Shay exhale, and touched her hand.

"He's not following us. I didn't think he would."

"Why wouldn't he, though?"

"Because he knows I can kick his ass. He'll do his best to get you alone."

"That's what worries me." She sighed.

"He won't have a chance, sweetheart. You're in your shop, the diner, or here. He's not going to do anything in the daylight, and at night, he won't get the chance."

"I know, but Wes, you didn't sign up for this."

He turned on the seat to face her.

"What do you want me to do? Stay away from you? That would give him the perfect opportunity."

"No. That's not what I meant. I just feel that you're going all out for me on this, and you don't really know me."

"I know enough, Shaylyn. I know you're a good person who's had a rough past, and I'm willing to help you get through it."

“But, why?”

“God, Shay. Don’t you know? I’m crazy about you.”

“What? You are?”

“I am.”

She grinned, slid across the seat, and cupped his cheek in her hand.

“I feel the same about you.” She kissed his lips.

Wes pulled her across his lap, and deepened the kiss. He slowly raised his lips and stared into her eyes.

“How about we go inside?”

“I’d like that.”

Wes opened his door, stepped out while still holding her, and after shoving the door closed with his hip, he carried her inside and set her on her feet.

“I’ll get your bag and the food. Don’t go anywhere.” He grinned.

“Only to bed with you.”

He gazed into her eyes and wanted her right there, but he sighed. They had all night.

“I’ll be right back. Hold that thought.”

Their eyes held for a few seconds, then Wes walked out to the truck. As he walked down the steps, he stopped to listen. He heard the horses neighing in the barn and he could hear the cattle in the fields, along with bullfrogs and crickets. There were no other sounds. Nothing unusual.

As he’d told Shay, he knew Newman wouldn’t confront him. He was only interested in getting to Shay and Wes would do everything in his power to keep that from happening.

He walked to the truck, removed the bag of food, her case, and headed back up the steps. He stood on the porch, and glanced around the area. He loved this place and wanted to have someone to share it with him. To love it as much as he did. He looked at the door. Could it be Shay? In his heart, he

had to admit, he hoped it was. She had come to mean so much to him in such a short time, but it didn't bother him. He wanted her in his life, but did she want the same? Would she be too afraid to commit to him after her fiasco with Newman? Wes shook his head. He just didn't know. She had to know he'd never hurt her.

With a sigh, he opened the door, but the kitchen was empty, so after setting the bag of food on the counter, he walked to the bedroom, and grinned when he heard the bathwater running. He set her case down, sat on the bed, and toed off his boots.

The door to the bathroom opened, and she stood in the doorway, naked and smiling. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, took a deep breath, then stared into her eyes.

“Are you going to join me?”

“I'd like that, if it's all right with you.”

“It's fine, cowboy. I'll be waiting.” She turned away and he quickly got to his feet, stripped, and entered the bathroom to see her stepping into the tub. He held her hand until she sat, then scooted forward. He got in behind her, and pulled her back against his chest. He smiled when she placed her head back against his shoulder, and sighed.

“This is so nice,” she murmured.

“It is. The water feels good.”

“I bet it does after working all day.”

“There are days, I wonder how I still get sore. I've been doing this almost my entire life. You'd think my muscles would be used to it.”

“Well, if you don't do the same thing every day, muscles are going to ache when used.” She snorted.

“What was that for?”

“I'm sorry. My mind slipped in the gutter.”

“How?”

She shrugged. “I was thinking there was one muscle on you that wouldn't ache if you used it.”

Wes laughed. “It aches when I don’t.”

Shay burst out laughing. “Only in certain situations, right?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t bother me at all when you’re not around. Wait. That’s not true. I think about you and...” He waved his hand.

“I like you, Weston Coleman. Probably way more than I should.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

She snuggled against him, and he wouldn’t have her anywhere else right now. He loved holding her and keeping her safe. Isn’t that what a man’s supposed to do for someone he loved? Keep them safe? He wouldn’t let Newman get close to her if he had anything to do with it. She picked up the soap and sponge she used, and washed herself, then him.

When the water began to cool, Wes stood, reached for a towel, and motioned for her to stand. She did, and he watched the water glide down her body. He stepped from the tub, quickly rubbed himself dry, and hung the towel up. He grabbed another one, wrapped it around her, lifted her out, and set her feet on the rug, then he dried her off. His dick was so damn hard, he’d be surprised he could walk.

He hung the towel up, lifted her, carried her to the bed, and placed her in the center of it, and lay down beside her. He pressed his lips to hers, and kissed her deeply. Her arms wrapped around his neck, making him groan.

Shay pushed on his shoulders, making him roll onto his back, then she straddled him, leaned down and kissed his lips. She slowly slid her lips along his jaw to the lobe of his ear, where she sucked it into her mouth. When he groaned, she smiled.

“Something funny?” he asked her.

“Nope. Nothing funny about this at all,” she said as she squeezed his dick in her hand. She lowered her head, put her lips over his nipple, and swirled her tongue around it, making it harden, then she moved down to his belly, and lower.

When she straddled his legs, she sat up, and stared at him. God! He was so handsome. As she gazed at him, she ran her hands up her belly to her breasts, and cupped them in her hands. She grinned when Wes moaned, but when he reached up to cup them, she slapped his hands away.

“This is my ride, my way. Relax, cowboy.”

“Who the fuck can relax?” he growled.

“I’ll help you,” she whispered as she lowered her head, and put her mouth over his dick, and he arched his back.

His fingers thrust into her hair as she moved her mouth along his length. She cupped his balls, and loved hearing him groan. This man always satisfied her, and she was going to make sure she did the same for him.

As she sucked on him, she watched him push his head back against the pillow, then he moved to sit up.

“No.” She pushed on his shoulders again. “My ride.”

“Damn it.”

She chuckled, slid up his legs, and looked at him.

“Condom?”

Wes reached into the nightstand, retrieved a condom, and handed it to her. She opened it with her teeth, removed it, and rolled it down over his hard cock, then she lifted herself, and slowly inched down over him. His hands gripped her hips.

Once she settled on him, she stared into his eyes, then started moving. His hands gripped her tighter, but she laughed and shook her head.

“Soon,” she whispered, then rocked against him. It wasn’t long before the feeling started building, and she knew she was going over. She squeezed her legs against his hips, and screamed when she came.

Wes sat up, kissed her lips, rolled her onto her back, settled between her legs, and took her hard until his orgasm hit him. He groaned her name against her neck.

As she tried to catch her breath, he slid down her body a little, and rested his head on her chest. She wrapped her arms around him, and hoped she never had to leave him.

Saturday evening, Shay stood in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection. Tess was picking her up in a few minutes.

“You look nice,” Wes said from the doorway of the bedroom.

“Thank you. Tess said jeans were fine.”

“Yeah. It’s just your typical cowboy bar, you’ve been there. Just make sure you turn those cowboys down when they ask you to dance.”

“Maybe they won’t even ask me.” She smiled.

Wes blew out a laugh. “Yeah, right.”

She walked toward him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and kissed his lips.

“I told you; you are the only cowboy I’m interested in.”

“Good thing, sweetheart.” He kissed her lips.

They pulled apart when they heard a horn sound.

“That must be Tess. Are you sure you’re all right with this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? You deserve a night out. I’ll be here when you come back.”

“That will make me look forward to the night ending.”

“Come on, before Tess leaves without you.” He took her hand, led her to the kitchen, and helped her put her sweater on.

“I can’t believe how chilly it is.”

“I told you it could snow in September.”

“I love it.” She kissed him again, picked up her purse, opened the door, and blew him a kiss. “I’ll be home later.”

“I’ll try to wait up, but no promises. I have to get up at four.”

“Okay. I’ll try to be quiet.”

“All right, darlin’. Keep an eye out and be careful.”

“I will. Bye.” She waved, walked out onto the porch, and ran down the steps.

When she opened the door, Tess called out to Wes.

“Hey, Wes.”

“Hi, Tess. Keep an eye on my girl.”

“Will do. Goodnight.”

The door closed as Shay climbed into the back seat and smiled at the other women.

“Shay, this is Piper Griffin, Rayna Dillon, and Lydia Griffin,” Tess said as she drove from the house. Since Tess was driving, she wouldn’t drink any alcohol tonight.

“Two Griffins? Are you related?” Shay asked.

“We’re married to brothers,” Lydia said. “Piper is married to Sawyer, and I’m married to Colson.”

“Dillon? Are you related to Trick?”

“Yes, he’s my husband. Do you know him?”

“I don’t, I just remembered Wes mentioning that Trick trained his horses.”

“That man can train any horse,” Tess said.

“Yes, he can,” Rayna said with pride.

A few minutes later, they entered the bar, and made their way through the crowd to get to a table. Shay laughed when she saw a few tables pushed together where other women sat, waving at them.

Before sitting down, Tess introduced her to everyone. They smiled at her and welcomed her. She took a seat between Tess and Piper. Lydia sat on the other side of Piper.

An hour later, she collapsed onto her chair after a line dance. She hadn't had so much fun in years. A night out with the girls was never... *allowed* when she lived with Lyle. Shaking her head, she wondered what she'd been thinking.

He wasn't a good man, but he hid it so well when they first got together then he changed and became a jealous monster that she had to hide from.

She picked up her drink, sipped it, and watched the women staying on the floor for another dance.

When they returned and sat, Tess tilted her head, and looked at Shay.

“What?”

“When did you plan on mentioning you were living with Wes?”

“Wes? Wes Coleman?” this from Olivia Stone.

“Oh, God. Here she goes,” Becca Stone muttered.

“Hey, that man is hot, and so is his brother. Warren Coleman is gorgeous. Both are.”

“We know, but we don't talk about it as much as you do, Olivia Rene Roberts Stone,” Emma Stone added.

Olivia laughed. “What do I always say?”

“I'm married, I ain't dead,” all the women at the table said together, making Olivia laugh and raise her glass.

“Here. Here.”

“Back to your question, Tess. I don't live with him. I'm just staying there so I'm not alone with Lyle being in town.”

As the women listened, Shay told them about Lyle, and all were sympathetic.

“A few of us have been there, Shay. JoJo, Piper, Rissa, Kelsey, and me,” Tess said. “I'm sure there are more, but don't talk about it.”

“I was surprised at how often it happens. I can't let him see he scares me, but he knows he does. He has never hit me—”

“That doesn’t mean he won’t. If he has a temper, he could snap. You need to be prepared. I was,” Piper said.

“What did you do, Piper?”

“My ex found me and came after me. I knew he would kill me this time. So Sawyer taught me how to shoot a gun. I was against it, but I am so glad I learned. I shot Cory when he came into my home after me.” She shrugged. “I killed him.”

Shay gasped. “That had to be hard on you.”

“It was. I had nightmares for months, but Sawyer got me through it.” Piper touched her hand. “I know it’s hard not showing fear, but you have to stand up to him.”

“Sam was shot then, too. God, I panicked when Brody came to my office to tell me. I almost passed out.” Tess sighed.

“Obviously, Sam was all right, but that had to be scary.”

“Terrifying. Those men are nothing but bullies and think they’re intimidating. Most who think that, aren’t.”

“That’s what Wes said. I stood up to Lyle in my shop recently, but I know it pissed him off.”

“Of course, it did. Because you *did* stand up to him, and you never did before, did you?” JoJo asked her.

“No. I was too afraid of what he was capable of. He asked me when I grew a pair, and I told him the day I left him. He didn’t like that at all.” Shay shook her head.

“This town, my husband, and his deputies will do all they can to protect you.” Tess smiled at her.

“I have no doubt, and that helps a lot.”

Later after another line dance, the women ordered more drinks. Most of them were feeling no pain, and Shay couldn’t stop smiling. She made a lot of friends tonight. She laughed when Mitzie Moore stood, tapped her nails against her glass and raised it.

“We are closing this bar down tonight! Who’s with me?”

All of them stood, clinked glasses, and then plopped back onto their seats and laughed.

When the bartender rang the bell behind the bar and shouted it was last call, everyone scrambled to get another drink.

Later, Tess stopped her SUV by the back porch, Shay opened the door, looked at the women and laughed, making them do the same.

“I had so much fun, but I know I am going to regret drinking that much in the morning.”

“Me too,” Piper groaned.

Shay giggled. “I’ll have to be quiet. I don’t want to wake Wes.”

“I know Trick will be asleep, but that man is going to be... *up* after I get home,” Rayna said and snorted out a laugh.

“I have to pee. I’d better go.” Shay shoved the door closed, turned to walk up the steps and tripped on the bottom one and fell. She rolled to her butt, sat up and laughed so hard she had tears in her eyes. She could hear the women in the vehicle laughing too.

“Are you okay?” Piper asked her.

“I’m too drunk to know,” Shay said and giggled when Piper burst out laughing.

Shay turned slowly, crawled up the steps, across the porch, and made her way to the door. The women were howling with laughter. She grabbed the knob, pulled herself up, pushed the door open, waved, entered the kitchen, and heard them drive off.

After closing the door, she tried to remove her sweater, but it was kicking her ass. She pulled on a sleeve, but only stretched it out, which made her laugh. She pulled a chair out from under the table, sat, toed off her boots, stood, and headed for the bedroom. The hell with the sweater. She’d take it off in a minute.

As she walked down the hallway to the bedroom, she stumbled and fell against the wall, which sent her into peals of laughter, but she immediately stopped when the hall light came on, and she saw Wes standing in the doorway of the bedroom. His arms were folded across that amazing *naked* chest, and he wore... oh, my. Gray sweatpants and she had no problem seeing his dick. Then she looked into his eyes, and when he raised an eyebrow, she cleared her throat.

“I... fell into the wall,” she said, and burst out laughing again.

“You’re drunk.”

“Me? *Pffft*, no.” She snorted and watched Wes shake his head.

“I have to get some sleep, Shay, so come to bed.” He frowned at her. “Why are you wearing your sweater?”

That just made her laugh harder. She bent over and put her hands on her knees and laughed. When she straightened up, he was gone. Had she angered him? She entered the bedroom to see him in the bed.

“Wes? Are you mad at me?”

“God, no, sweetheart. I just need to get back to sleep. Apparently, my woman thinks coming into the house at two in the morning, doesn’t mean she should be quiet.”

“I’m your woman?” She crawled onto the bed and sat back on her heels.

“Of course, you are. Don’t you want to be?”

“Yes.” She leaned down and kissed his lips. “You’re my man.”

Wes turned his head away from her.

“Brush your teeth,” he said, making her giggle.

“You don’t like Callahan and Coke?”

“Yeah, when I’m drinking it. Not second hand. How many did you have?”

“Oh, I stopped counting after five.”

“Damn, Shay. That’s a strong drink. No wonder you’re plastered.”

She sat up and tried to remove her sweater again, but got frustrated, and pulled harder at it.

Wes sat up. “Let me help you.”

Shay stopped fighting the sweater and let Wes remove it.

“Thank you. I have to pee.”

Wes huffed out a laugh. “You know where the bathroom is.”

Shay glanced at the doorway, back to Wes, but proceeded to lay down.

“I thought you had to use the bathroom?”

“I do. I just need to rest a minute.” She groaned. “My head hurts.”

“You think it hurts now, wait until the sun comes up.”

“Wonderful. I guess I overdid it.”

“But you had fun, right?”

“I did. I love those women. I have a bunch of new friends now.” She smiled, as she tried to keep her eyes open.

“I’m glad. Get some sleep, baby.”

“Okay,” she murmured. “I need a kiss first.” She sat up, leaned over Wes to kiss him, but did a faceplant on his chest. “I missed,” she said and laughed.

Wes chuckled. “Yeah, you did. Do you want your clothes off?”

“I’ll do it later,” she whispered as she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

Wes spurred Ajax to catch up with the cattle bolting away from the herd. As he closed in on them, he whipped his rope around and shouted commands that got their attention. Two Border collies joined in, nipping at their heels so they could be steered back.

He thought of Shay and her hangover, amused by the situation. He was happy she could stay in today; he'd been there before with one too many drinks.

Rounding up the cattle for the upcoming drive, Wes guided them toward the barns where they'd be readied to be moved to the northern range.

After cooling Ajax down, rewarding him with some extra oats, Wes headed into the barn office. He entered information like ear tags into the computer for logging purposes, then emailed it to Warren.

Once he finished with the emails, he walked to his truck, climbed inside, and drove to his house. He wanted to check on Shay.

He parked, entered the house, removed his hat and hung it on a peg, then headed for the bedroom. It was quiet, so he opened the bedroom door slowly to see her in the bed with the blanket over her head. He grinned as he made his way to the bed, gently sat on the edge of it, and touched the top of her head.

“Shay?”

“Shhh, my head is throbbing,” she whispered.

Wes bit his lip. Damn, been there, done that. Too many times not to know how she was feeling.

“I just wanted to make sure you were—” He immediately stopped talking and stood when she threw the blanket off, placed her hand over her mouth, got out of bed, and ran into the bathroom. He shook his head when he heard her throwing

up. If she had an inkling that he thought this was amusing, he'd have no balls.

Sitting back on the bed again, he wasn't sure if she wanted him in there or not. He sure as shit didn't want anyone around him when he was sick like that, but she might need help getting back to bed. He pushed to his feet, walked to the doorway, and peered inside.

“Do you need help getting back to bed?”

She shook her head, and waved him away. He nodded.

“Okay, I'll be back—” She threw up again and he chuckled until she raised her head and narrowed her eyes at him. He cleared his throat. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I'll get you some water and crackers. Sip the water, don't down it. It will keep you hydrated. The crackers might calm your stomach.” He grinned when she waved her hand at him.

“Wes, please go,” she pleaded.

“All right, darlin'. I'll be right back with your water and crackers.”

“Okay—” She leaned over the toilet again, vomited, sat up, leaned against the side of the tub, and looked at him. “I'm never drinking again.” Wes laughed and she glared at him. “I hate you right now.”

He chuckled as he left the room. After getting the water, crackers, and aspirin for her, he returned to work. She had a long, hard day ahead of her.

The following week, Shay sat in Wes's truck as he drove them to the fairgrounds, pulling a horse trailer behind. She sat up and smiled as she saw the rides of the fair. Putting the window down, she inhaled the scents. Popcorn, hot dogs, burgers, funnel cake, and Polish sausage frying with onions and peppers. Her stomach growled.

“Hungry?” Wes asked her.

“Starving. I want one of everything.” She laughed.

“That can be arranged.” Wes pulled behind a pavilion and parked.

After he exited the truck, Shay stepped out, followed him to the back of the trailer, watched him open it, and then lead his horse out. He tied the reins around the gate of the trailer.

“I hope you win today.” She stood on her toes and kissed his lips.

“Thanks, but if my brother shows up, I won’t.” He grinned at her.

“He’s that good, huh?”

“The best and everyone knows it.” He took her hand. “Let’s get something to eat and look around. The race isn’t for a couple of hours.”

“Is it always this crowded?”

“Yes, since this is the last big event of the season, everyone turns out.”

“It seems like they enjoy the horse race. How far do you ride?” Shay grinned as she glanced around at the crowd.

“It’s a mile and a half round trip. It’s an old dirt road. At the end of the road, we turn left, and follow it back to the line. It’s the highlight of the fair.”

“There are a lot of trailers. How many racers are there?”

“Ten to fifteen. It’s more for fun than anything. We’re competitive, but it’s not malicious.”

“Is Warren going to show?”

Wes glanced around and shook his head.

“I don’t know. He said he’d try.”

“I was hoping he would. I’d love to see him ride since you said he was so good at it.”

“Yeah, I was—” He stopped when he heard a loud groan from the crowd. He looked around and laughed.

“What are they all groaning about?” She frowned.

Wes leaned close. “Warren’s here.”

Shay laughed. “They were hoping he wouldn’t show, weren’t they?”

“Yes. Hell, I wish he hadn’t.” He laughed.

They walked around the fair until the PA announced it was time for the race and all riders were to get their horses to the starting area. Wes kissed Shay’s lips.

“Stay here. The starting line is right over there.” He pointed across the way to a rope hanging across a dirt road. “You’ll be able to see well from here.”

“Okay. Good luck,” she said and kissed him.

“I’ll need it.” He winked, then walked to his trailer to get Ajax.

As Wes walked the horse to the start/finish line, he stopped when he saw his brother.

“You just couldn’t stay home, could you?”

Warren laughed. “Is that the only way you can win? If I drop out?”

“Hell, it’s the only way anyone can win.” Wes laughed.

Warren chuckled. “I look forward to this, almost as much as the cattle drive.”

“You’re going?”

“Yeah, I decided to go. I need a break.”

“Shay’s going.” Wes grinned.

“Good. I’m sure she’ll have a great time.”

“Well, let’s get ready.”

“I am ready. Are you?” Warren grinned.

“I was... until you got here.”

Warren laughed. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, you are.” Wes shook his head.

“Warren? You showed up late on purpose,” Wyatt Stone said.

“Come on, Wyatt. Why would I do that?”

Wes and Wyatt laughed.

“No clue.” Wyatt shrugged.

“Everyone mount up and we’ll get this race started. This is a fun race. There will be no dirty racing. No kicking, pushing, or running a competitor off the road. Be careful out there. If you see someone having trouble, help them. This is not for any trophy, only bragging rights. Isn’t that right, Warren Coleman?” the PA announced, and the crowd laughed.

“I have years of bragging rights,” Warren shouted, making the crowd laugh again.

“Just get on the damn horse, Warren. Hell, we should all drop out now,” Preston Mitchell yelled.

Wes chuckled as Warren shook his head and laughed. Everyone knew how good Warren was. The only ones remotely close were Gage Beckett on his horse, Shadow, or Trick Dillon on his horse, Trapper. Hank Barnett’s horse was fast too, but he wasn’t participating this year, and they all had trouble keeping up with Warren.

Since they’d been children, Warren outrode him. He never competed, except in the race, and it was all fun for him. His horse, Blaze, was a big, brown, white, and black American Paint, with a black blaze down its face, standing eighteen hands, and could almost outrun the wind.

Warren raised the horse from birth when the mare died. Wes remembered how Warren would sit in the barn at all hours, feeding the colt.

Blaze loved Warren, and the feeling was mutual. That horse could fly, and Wes knew no one in this race stood a chance, but no one cared. It was a yearly thing and the towns loved it.

The sun hung high in the sky and warmed the earth. It was a great day, Wes thought as he mounted his horse. He watched the other riders mount up, and saw Warren mount Blaze, and the horse started prancing. Even the damn horse knew he was going to win.

Wes rode back to where Warren sat.

“Ready, little brother?” Warren asked him.

“For what? Watching your back?”

Warren chuckled. “I’m in the back you know.”

Wes snorted. “Like that ever made a difference to you and that horse.”

Many of his and Warren’s friends were participating, and a lot of them stayed close to the back.

“Bad thing about being back here is the damn dust,” Jake Stone said.

“Well, that’s when you get to the front, Jake.” Warren grinned.

“Shut the fuck up, Coleman,” Landry Yates said, making them laugh.

“Ready, set, go,” the PA announced. The horses bolted from the start/finish line when a gun shot went off.

Shay jumped when the gun sounded, but she laughed as she watched the riders spur their horses and take off down the road. Wes had explained the road they used was an old dirt road that ran along the back of Clifton into Spring City, and then circled back.

She clapped her hands with the crowd when the riders rode off, throwing dust up behind them. She saw Wes go past on Ajax, but didn't see Warren. She tried to look over everyone's heads, but she couldn't.

"Where are you, Warren?" she murmured.

"He's waiting," Rayna said from beside her.

"Oh, hi Rayna. Is Trick racing?"

"Yes. Shay, this is our daughter, Harlee. Harlee, say hello to Shay."

"Hi," the little girl said, and hid behind Rayna's legs.

"She is beautiful."

"She looks like her mama." Rayna smiled.

Shay frowned. She didn't think Harlee looked like Rayna at all, but she didn't want to say anything.

"Harlee is my stepdaughter," Rayna said in a whisper.

"Oh! I didn't know."

"It's fine. I love her like my own."

"Good for you." Shay smiled as she looked to see Warren finally riding off. "That horse is gorgeous."

"His name is Blaze. Trick trained him, but that horse loves Warren. As much as I hate to say it because I want Trick to win, no one can beat Warren on that horse."

"It's a good thing it's all in fun," Shay said, laughing.

"How was your head the day after our night out?" Rayna grinned.

Shay moaned. "Please do not mention that night again."

When Rayna laughed, Shay did too, then turned her attention back to the racers.

Warren nudged his horse, and it reared up, but as soon as its hooves hit the dirt, it was off like a shot. Shay watched him run, and was in awe at how they moved as one. That horse

flew. She laughed when she saw Warren put his hand on his hat to hold it down.

She stepped out from the crowd and shook her head as the horse kicked up dust, and disappeared chasing the other riders.

“How does he even catch up?”

“He’ll have no problem catching them,” Sam said from beside her.

“Oh, hey, Sam. Why aren’t you racing?”

“Someone has to watch over the town.” He grinned as he shifted a little girl in his arms.

“Have you ever participated?”

“Plenty of times.”

“I love watching him race, but he’s not into it much anymore.” Tess smiled.

“Is this your daughter?” Shay asked. The little girl was beautiful with her dark hair and blue eyes.

“Yes, this is Genivieve. We call her Geni. She’s named after Sam’s mother.”

“She is gorgeous. Of course, look at her parents. Why wouldn’t she be?”

Sam and Tess grinned at her, then Tess leaned close.

“Did you have a hangover?”

“Oh, God. Like I told Rayna, please do not mention that night again.”

Tess chuckled and Shay grinned.

As the crowd waited for the racers to return, Shay smiled as she glanced around the crowd, but the smile died when she saw Lyle staring at her from across the street.

“Sam?” She clutched his arm.

“I see him. He’s not going to get close to you, Shay. I don’t think he’ll even try. He’s just trying to intimidate you.”

“And doing a damn fine job at it.”

“Never let him see your fear, Shay,” Tess whispered to her.

“You’re right.” She straightened up, and refused to look in his direction again.

As she stood there, watching, an older gentleman stepped up beside her, and looked at her.

“Hi, there,” he said.

Shay smiled. “Hello.”

“You own that fancy glass store, don’t you?”

“Yes, have you been in?”

“Oh, honey, you don’t want me in there. I’m a bull in a China shop.” He grinned, and stuck his hand out to her. “I’m Jim Barton. I own a pig farm close to the Hartland County line on the Hartland side.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Barton.” Shay shook his hand.

“Call me Jim. It’s nice to see Wes have a woman in his life. He’s a good man.”

She stared into his eyes and knew he believed every word he said.

“He is.” She fanned herself with her hand. “It’s hot today.”

“Yes, ma’am, for September, it is. I’m sweating like a pig that knows he’s for dinner,” Jim said.

She laughed when he winked at her, then they continued watching the race.

A few minutes later, the crowd started cheering and she looked to see a rider approaching, but it wasn’t Warren. Maybe this would be the year he lost. She hoped not. Even though Wes had teased about his brother always winning, she knew he wanted Warran to cross the finish line first.

“Who is that?”

“Gage Beckett. His horse is fast, but—” Sam shook his head and pointed to behind the leader.

Shay laughed and clapped her hands when she saw Warren flying up behind the man leading the race. Dust flew up

behind the hooves as Warren leaned over the horse's neck, and it looked like the horse ran faster. She saw the leader glance over his shoulder, grin, and shake his head as Warren gained on him, overtook him, and crossed the finish line first. The crowd roared. She grinned as she watched Warren dismount without the horse completely stopping, then he turned to the crowd, removed his hat, and took a bow.

Seconds later, she saw Wes crossing the finish line and she watched him laugh when he saw Warren already there. She loved how close they were, and at times like this, wished she had a sibling.

She glanced around for Lyle, but didn't see him, so she ran to Wes. She watched as he dismounted and shook Warren's hand.

"Congratulations, Warren," she said.

"Thank you, Shay." He grinned.

"Whatever," Wes muttered, then chuckled.

"Damn it, Warren. I was sure I had it this year," the man who had been leading, said as he put his hand out for Warren to shake, then put his free arm around a pretty brunette, who gazed up at him with a smile on her face.

"Maybe next year," Warren said.

"Yeah... if you don't enter." Gage laughed.

"Gage? This is Shay Rogers. Shay this is Gage and Hailey Beckett," Wes introduced them.

"It's so nice to meet you," she said.

"The pleasure is ours," Hailey said as she shook her hand, then Gage did.

As they walked around the grounds later, Shay couldn't keep the smile off her face. Wes introduced her to a lot of people, and once they learned she owned the shop, they promised to stop by.

Everyone was so nice to her, but what did she expect. The towns were wonderful.

“I forgot to tell you. Lyle was here.”

“What? When?”

“I saw him when I was watching Warren ride off. He was across the street.”

“He didn’t say anything to you?”

“No. He just stared at me, but Sam was standing next to me, and I’m sure Lyle was too chicken to do anything.”

“I told you, he’s only interested in scaring you. He knows he doesn’t bother Sam, his deputies, or me.”

“I wish he’d leave.”

“Me too. Doesn’t he work?”

“He builds computers for a living, which he can do from anywhere.”

“I doubt if he’s working. He’s too focused on you.”

“I know. I just want it over with, Wes.”

“I do too. You’ll be able to relax on the cattle drive. There’s no way he’d follow you there.”

“When do we go?”

“Next weekend. It will take your mind off things.”

“I had a woman come in and apply for the job. I think I’m going to hire her. She seems really nice.”

“What’s her name? I might know her.”

“Parker Tisdale, but I doubt you’d know her. She’s from Oklahoma.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t know her.”

“She came in and once we talked, I knew we’d work well together.”

“Did she give you references?”

“Yes. I’m going to call them to make sure she’s who she says she is.”

“Good idea.” He put his arm around her shoulder. “What do you want to do now?”

“Can we walk around? I love watching the games.”

“Sure. Come on, and I’ll try to win you a stuffed animal.” He grinned.

“Okay.”

Wes took her hand, and they walked along the midway. She knew Lyle would never try something in a crowd, so she was safe for now. She couldn’t stop smiling as she listened to the screams from the rides, game sounds, and laughter. She loved living in this town. She missed New York, but she could always visit. They stopped at a booth for balloon darts, and she watched Wes pay the attendant. He handed Wes three darts.

“Good luck, man.”

“Thanks.” Wes looked at Shay. “Pick a prize, darlin’, and give me a kiss for luck.”

Shay laughed, kissed his lips, and looked at the stuffed animals. She pointed to a huge pink pig, then she removed his hat from his head, and placed it on hers, making him grin.

“I want that one.”

“How many for that one?” Wes asked the man.

“Six darts... in a row.” He smirked.

Wes grinned. “You’re on.”

She watched the man hand Wes three more darts. He set them on the counter of the booth and picked one up. He stared at the balloons, threw the dart, and busted a balloon. People standing behind them cheered. He did it four more times.

When he picked up the sixth dart, he kissed Shay, turned to face the balloons, aimed, and threw the dart... busting the sixth balloon. The crowd behind him, cheered.

Wes grinned at the man inside the booth.

“She’ll take the pig.”

The man shook his head, reached up, unhooked the pig, and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” Shay said as she hugged it to her.

“Good game,” the man said.

“I’m just glad I didn’t let her down,” Wes said with a grin, as he removed his hat from her head, placed it on his, then took her hand, and led her through the crowd.

The sun was beginning to set when they decided to leave. As they headed for his truck, she saw an older couple coming toward them, smiling.

“Weston,” the woman said.

“Mom.” Wes hugged her then turned to the man beside her and hugged him too. “Dad.”

“Are you leaving?”

“We’ve been here most of the day. Oh, this is Shay Rogers. Shay, my parents, Charlotte, and Robert Coleman.”

“It’s so nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Coleman.”

“Please, call us Charlotte and Robert. It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Shay,” Charlotte Coleman said as she shook her hand.

“Yes, it’s a pleasure,” Robert Coleman said with a smile, then looked at Wes. “Did you race?”

“Yeah,” Wes muttered, making his parents and Shay laugh.

“I take it Warren won again?” his mother asked.

“Of course. Everyone was hoping he wouldn’t show.”

“It was fun to watch though,” Shay added.

“We tried to get here in time for it, but we were running late. We were out for a ride and forgot until we got back.” Charlotte shook her head.

“Why bother? You knew who would win too.” Wes grinned.

“True. What is it you do, Shay?” Charlotte asked her.

“I own A Touch of Glass. I sell my uncle’s handblown glass.”

“Is that where you got my birthday gift, Weston?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I love it. Your uncle made that?” Charlotte asked in surprise.

“Yes. He’s an amazing glassmith. I wish I had that kind of talent.”

“Well, it’s a beautiful piece.”

“I’ll let him know. He’ll appreciate that.”

“We’ll let you two go. We’re going to find Warren and congratulate him. Come on, Charlie, let’s find our other son.” Robert took her hand in his.

“Shay? It was so nice meeting you. Weston, bring her to dinner one night. I’m ready when you are, Robbie.”

Wes and Shay bid them goodbye and headed for his truck. He had tied Ajax’s reins to the trailer but removed his other tack before they walked around. He untied the reins, and led the horse into the trailer. Shay placed her pig in the back seat, climbed into the truck, and looked out of the windshield. She’d had a wonderful day until she saw Lyle, but she refused to let him ruin her day and enjoyed herself.

The sun began to dip behind the mountains, turning the sky shades of red, orange, and pink.

When Wes opened the door and slid onto the seat. She smiled at him, and he raised an eyebrow.

“I love how your mom and dad call each other those nicknames.”

Wes grinned. “They are the only ones allowed to call each other those names. To everyone else, they’re Charlotte, and Robert.”

“I love that. It’s their pet names for each other. They seem very much in love.”

“Yeah, they are. I want a marriage like that.” Wes started the truck. “Let’s head home, sweetheart. It’s been a fun day, but a long one.”

Shy nodded and couldn’t hold back a yawn.

“I don’t know why I’m so tired,” she murmured.

“Being out all day can do that to you. We’ll relax when we get home. I’m tired too.”

Shay nodded. She was so glad to have met Wes. She just hoped that Lyle would eventually get it through his head that it was over, and she’d never return to him. *If only...*

Wes rode Ajax through the pasture, slapping the coiled rope against his thigh, yelling and whistling at the cattle. The dogs kept them moving. They were rounding them up to get them closer to the barns until it was time to move them. They were leaving early tomorrow morning, and he was happy Shay was going.

He looked across the herd to see Warren doing the same thing he was. Wes was glad he was going too. It’s too bad his parents weren’t going this year.

As he watched his brother, he couldn’t help but hope that Warren would find someone. He was such a good man, and not just because he was his brother. Wes would respect him even if he weren’t.

Warren rarely took a day off, so Wes was happy he decided to join in the cattle drive. Not that it wasn’t work, but everyone enjoyed going and camping under the stars or in tents. He couldn’t wait to get started.

Once they rounded the cattle up, a few of the men kept them close by keeping an eye on them. There were always a few dawdlers or ones that would bolt. The dogs kept the

stragglers moving by nipping at their heels, but the ranch hands had to bring the wanderers back.

The following morning, Wes led Shay to the barn, and grinned when she kept yawning.

“You didn’t tell me we were getting up before the sun,” she muttered.

“We have to get moving since it takes a while to get there. We’ll stop for lunch to let the cattle rest and graze, then move on.”

“Yeah, okay.” She yawned again.

“Did you make sure to eat?”

“I had a couple of pieces of toast.”

“You should have eaten more. You need more than that to keep up your strength. I’ll get you something from the wagon.”

“Okay. I’ll probably be too sleepy to eat it, but I’ll try.”

Wes nodded, and led her to the chuckwagon.

“Wes? Do you need something before we go?” Eustice, the cook, asked him.

“Yes. Could you fix her a good breakfast? We’ll head out in about twenty minutes.”

“Sure, I can do that.” He smiled at Shay. “How about some scrambled eggs? I can make those quick.”

“I’d love that. Thank you,” Shay said.

“I’m going to check on the horses. Eat your breakfast and we’ll leave soon.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Wes kissed her lips.

“You’re welcome, darlin’. I’ll see you in a little while.”

He grinned thinking about her being sleepy. If you didn’t do this every day, it would be hard to get into it. He’d been doing it since he was eighteen. He’d worked at the ranch since

he was a kid, but it wasn't until he got older, that his father put him to work as a ranch hand. He didn't think he'd ever worked that hard in his life. That was one reason he had respect for all his men.

Entering the barn, he walked to where his horse and Shay's were tied. He saw Maverick walking toward him.

"Hey, Maverick," he called out.

"Wes. Good morning. Are we about to head out?"

"In a little while. I had to have Eustice make something for Shay. She only had toast." He grinned when Maverick shook his head.

"That wouldn't get her very far. I'll see you out there."

Wes nodded as he watched Maverick walk around him, and headed out of the barn. He'd been at the Triple C for twenty-four years. Since he was eighteen. He'd worked his way up from a hand to foreman, and it was well deserved. The man rarely slowed down, but he was also a strict taskmaster. The men respected him, and it was mutual, but if someone didn't do their job or screwed up, Maverick didn't hesitate to let them know that they weren't doing things right or that they needed to buckle down and stop screwing up the good work of others on the ranch.

At times though, Maverick seemed somewhat lost in thought, leaving Wes unsure why that might be so. He knew nothing of his past; his father had hired him, even though he hadn't attended college, he was clearly knowledgeable when it came to working on a ranch. Wes trusted him and knew when he told Maverick about Shay, it went no further.

As he led the horses from the barn, he saw Shay entering, and walking toward him.

"You look awake now," he said with a grin.

"I think the breakfast helped with that. It was nice of Eustice to make it for me."

"He loves cooking. His wife is with him, but I'm sure he'll want to prepare all the meals."

“You have wonderful employees, Weston.”

“We do for sure. Dad does the hiring, but it’s always the right decision.”

She stepped forward, slipped her arms around his waist, stood on her toes, and kissed his lips. He removed his hat, placed it on her head, and pulled her tight against him as he deepened the kiss, then raised his lips from hers.

“Do you want to take my clothes off?”

Wes frowned. “What?”

“Didn’t you say that if a cowboy places his hat on a woman’s head, he wants to remove her clothes?”

He huffed out a laugh. “That is not what I said.”

She frowned at him. “What did you say?”

“Giving a woman his hat shows a man’s attraction. If she takes it off him, *she* wants to remove more.” He shook his head. “You said you’d remember that.”

She laughed. “I guess I remembered wrong.”

“Ya think?” He handed her the reins. “Here, lead your horse out.”

“If your parents were going, would I have had to pick another horse?”

“No. They have their own horses. Mom just named her.”

“Oh, good. I love this horse.”

“I think she feels the same. Oh, here.” He handed her a bandana.

“What’s this for?”

“To keep the dust out of your mouth and nose. Trust me, you’ll be glad you’re wearing it.”

“Okay.” She tied the bandana around her neck then pulled it over her nose. “Do I look like a cowgirl?”

“You know what a cowgirl is, right?” Wes grinned.

“Same as a cowboy.” She shrugged.

“In some terms. It’s what a woman’s called who’s on top, riding her man.”

Shay grinned. “Then, yeah. I’m a cowgirl.”

Wes chuckled. “Maybe you can ride me later in the tent.”

“I am not having sex with you on this drive, Weston.”

He stopped and looked at her.

“What? You expect me to go two weeks without sex, with you sleeping beside me?”

“People will know,” she hissed.

“Like they don’t know we’re having sex?” He shook his head. “For God’s sake, Shaylyn, you’re staying with me. I’m sure they know you’re not in a spare bedroom.”

She gasped. “I never thought of that. Damn you, Weston Coleman.”

“Damn me? Why?”

“Because...”

“Because, why?”

“I don’t know. It sounded good.”

Wes shook his head. “Let’s go.”

He led Ajax from the barn, tied him to a rail, and walked to Shay to help her mount up. No sex? He’d see about that.

Chapter Ten

Wes checked his watch to see it was almost eleven. It had been a long time since breakfast, so he was sure everyone was ready for lunch. He rode over to Warren.

“I think we need to stop for lunch.”

Warren nodded. “Sounds good.”

“I’ll let Maverick know.” Wes rode to where Maverick sat on his horse, watching the cattle. “Maverick?”

“Hey, Wes. What’s up?”

“We’re stopping here. Let the men know, please.”

“Yes, sir.” Maverick nudged his horse and rode toward the back of the herd.

Wes glanced around to see where Shay was, and he saw her laughing at something Tom was saying. Wes kneed Ajax and rode toward them.

“Hey,” he said when he reached them.

“Hi.” She smiled at him.

“We’re going to stop for lunch now.” He looked at Tom. “Help with the cattle, please.”

“Yes, sir.” Tom looked at Shay, and touched the brim of his hat and rode off.

“My butt hurts,” Shay said, making Wes chuckle.

“Well, I’d massage it for you, but you said no sex.”

“Massaging my butt is not sex, Weston Coleman.”

“It would be by the time I got done.”

When she burst out laughing, he laughed.

“We’ll see,” she said when she composed herself.

“Sounds good to me. Come on, sweetheart, you have to be hungry.”

“I’m starving.”

“We’ll go to the creek to wash off. You have more dust and grime on you than you realize.”

“That sounds refreshing but it feels cooler here. Won’t the water be cold?”

“It is chillier here due to the higher elevation, and yes, the water will be cold, but it will feel great to get the dust and grime off you.”

“You’re the boss,” she said with a grin.

He moved his horse closer to her, leaned over and kissed her lips.

“Remember that when I tell you we’re having sex in the tent. Tonight.”

When she gasped, he grinned.

“I was humoring you.”

Wes laughed. “Okay.”

Shay chuckled. “Where do I put Petunia?”

“Under the tree.” Wes pointed to a group of trees. “We like to keep them in the shade. You’ll need to remove the saddle, and blanket, but keep her tied. There’s a couple of rails you can tie her to. Since we stop here when we’re moving cattle, we built the rails. We don’t need to be chasing after the horses.” He smirked.

“All right.” She turned the reins and kneed the horse, making Petunia turn.

Wes grinned watching her. She had learned very quickly, and she seemed to enjoy riding. *She could ride him later.* He shook his head. It seemed like that was all he thought about anytime he was with her. He chuckled. Hell, he didn’t even have to be with her.

Shay pulled the saddle and blanket off Petunia and set them under the rail. She noticed a lot of saddles were like that, so she assumed it was to keep the horses from stepping on them. She shrugged. She had no clue.

After rubbing Petunia's nose, she walked toward the chuckwagon but stopped in her tracks when she saw the line of people. Her stomach growled at the smells, but it didn't look like she'd be eating very soon. Then she saw Eustice's wife start another line, and Shay rushed to get in that one.

As she stood there, she glanced around and grinned. This was more fun than she'd thought it would be. She loved watching the cowboys moving their horses along the herd making sure none of the little buggers ran off.

It seemed they were a calm bunch, but occasionally, one or two would try to escape and they were usually young ones. The dogs, along with a rider, would go after them, and herd them back to the group.

After getting her lunch, which consisted of a hamburger, potato salad, macaroni salad, cornbread, and a Gatorade or water. She took a seat on one of the logs surrounding the fire pit, removed her cowboy hat, and dug in. She groaned at the taste of the food. She didn't know if it was that good or she was extremely hungry. Probably both.

She grinned when she saw Wes heading her way, holding a plate of food. Her eyes skimmed down his body and she bit her lip looking at those chaps. Whoever invented them, she'd like to thank. She wouldn't doubt if it was a woman, she thought with a grin.

Wes reached her, sat beside her, and smiled at her.

"Are you doing all right?"

"I am. I love this. I have no idea what's going on, but I love watching."

Wes chuckled. “There’s more going on than people realize.”

“It can be difficult, can’t it? I mean, I notice some of the cattle will break from the herd.”

“We always have a few stragglers, but that’s what the dogs are for. They know how to get them back. A rider will follow too, but the dogs are natural herders, so they do their job.”

“They’re so pretty.”

“Smartest herder is a Border collie, followed closely by Australian shepherds. We have a few Blue Heelers too, but we leave them at the ranch to help with other cattle.”

“How many dogs do you have?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Ten, but just five with us.”

“This can be dangerous though, can’t it?”

“Herding cattle on horseback can be relatively easy. You have one guy who pushes from the back of the herd, that’s Maverick, and the dogs that make sure there are no runners. There are cowboys who make sure they’re going in the right direction from riding alongside the herd. When you’re riding the side of the herd, it’s just to make sure there are no bolters. But it’s mostly following orders from the boss. That’s me. There are times where any of this can get dangerous if there is a pissed off bull. The worst herding is dealing with individual animals. Individual cattle are scared. So you will get an animal that will bolt at full speed in the wrong direction or try to climb a fence. To answer your question, sometimes, yes, it can be dangerous.”

“But you love it, don’t you?”

“I do.” He glanced around. “I love this land.”

“I can tell. I can see it in your face and hear it in your voice when you talk about this place. It’s just so beautiful.”

“Yes. It’s why we’ll do all we can to keep it in the family.”

“You will,” she said, as she laid her head on his shoulder, and smiled when he kissed the top of her head.

“I hope so.”

After eating and resting a bit, everyone cleaned up, and mounted their horses to start again.

Shay pulled the bandana over her nose, slipped her sunglasses on, and followed along behind the chuckwagon. She met a few other wives and girlfriends, and they rode together. They were laughing and having a great time. She'd do this again in a heartbeat.

A while later, she saw Wes raise his hand, turn in the saddle, and tell everyone this is where they would stop for the night. Shay sighed with relief. Her ass was never going to be the same.

She was told to let the horse run, so she unsaddled Petunia, but left the halter on. Wes told her the horses knew to stick around, and since the cattle would be allowed to roam, it wasn't a problem. A few of the riders stayed in the saddle, but she also knew they worked in shifts. She didn't envy the men who had to stay up all night keeping an eye on the herd. Once the cattle were roaming on their own, everyone was able to relax, and she was definitely looking forward to that.

Wes arched his back after erecting the tent. He loved this drive, but it could make you wish for a hot tub to relax your muscles. He glanced around and saw Shay sitting on a log, talking with another woman.

She had to be sore. He strode over to her, and sat beside her.

“Are you okay?”

She leaned close. “My ass hurts.”

Wes chuckled. “I bet. I brought the liniment.” He raised his eyebrows.

Shay laughed. “I'll let you put that on later.”

“Looking forward to it. Do you want to walk to the creek?”

“Yes. I know the water’s cold, but I want to wash off.”

“You can bathe if you’d like. I’ll make sure no one comes around.”

“Oh, I’d love that. I feel so dusty.”

“That’s because you are.”

“How about now?”

“Sure, then we can eat when we get back. I’ll let Warren know.”

“Okay. I’ll get my towel and soap, and meet you at the tent.”

After talking with his brother, Wes strolled to the tent to see Shay standing outside of it, holding a towel and a bar of soap. He inwardly grinned as he thought about her getting into the water. At the last stop, she was shocked at how cold the creek was, but since she only washed off, she didn’t get into the creek. If she wanted to get cleaned up, she’d have to this time.

“Ready?”

She nodded. “I can’t wait.”

“We’ll see,” he murmured.

“What?”

“Nothing. Come on.” He took her hand and led her to the bank of the creek. “The cattle are downstream so don’t worry about that.”

“I didn’t even think of that. It’s a good thing you know what you’re doing, or I’d be lost.”

“You’d be fine. If you want to strip, go ahead. I’ll make sure no one comes around but I’m sure Warren and Maverick will keep people away until we get back.”

“Are you getting in too?”

“I will once you’re finished. Did you bring shampoo?”

“Yes.” She held up the bottle. “Can you get in with me?”

“If you want.”

“Please. I’d feel better.”

“Why? There’s nothing in there.”

She glared at him. “Just get in the damn creek, Coleman.”

He laughed. “Yes, ma’am.”

After stripping off their clothes, he held her hand as they stepped into the water.

“Shit. Shit. Shit,” Shay exclaimed.

“It’s a little chilly.”

“A little chilly? It’s freezing.”

“You’ll get used to it in a minute.” Wes let go of her hand, dipped under the water, came back up, and hissed in a breath. “Shit is right.”

Shay laughed, then she took a deep breath, dunked under the water, and came back up with her teeth chattering.

“I’m washing and getting the hell out of here. I hope you have a fire this evening.”

“We will. It’s nice sitting around the fire pit.”

“Do you make s’mores?”

“Sure we do. Sometimes one of the men will bring a guitar and play while we all relax.”

“Are we getting up early tomorrow too?”

“Yeah, so we can get them moving.”

“I can’t tell you how much fun this is. It doesn’t even bother me that the shop is closed.” She began to wash, and Wes did the same.

“Did you get the references on the woman you might hire?”

“Yes. It all checked out. She’ll start the Monday after we get back.” She nibbled on her bottom lip. “I wonder what Lyle’s been doing. He’s probably getting more pissed by the day that he can’t find me.”

“I hope it drives him crazy.”

“He’s crazy enough. I just want him gone, but I know that’s not going to happen.”

“It will, Shay. One way or another that piece of shit is leaving Clifton and you behind in his rearview mirror. If I have to run him out myself.”

“I can’t imagine how angry he is by now.”

“Then we’ll have to be extra careful once we get home.”

“Do you know that I haven’t given him a thought though, until now?”

“That’s good. You’re relaxing.”

“Yes. Uh, can we get out now? I’m shivering.”

“Yeah, my damn balls are freezing.”

Shay snorted, making him laugh.

“Should I check them for you?”

“Later.” He winked.

“I said I wasn’t having sex with you in the tent, Weston Coleman.”

“I know what you said.”

She shook her head. “I can see this is going to be a long night.” She sighed. “I never realized how much being outdoors can tire you, but it feels so good when the sun is shining down on you.”

“I can’t see being cooped up all day. This is my office. Even Warren gets out of the house as much as he can.”

Wes held her hand while she walked from the creek, followed her up the embankment, and they both dried off. He grinned when he heard her teeth chattering as she dressed. After he dressed, he pulled her into his arms, kissed her lips, and gazed into her eyes.

“I’ll warm you later. I promise.”

“I’ll return the favor.”

“Looking forward to it, darlin’. Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

Shay nodded, took his hand and they walked back to the camp. Wes could smell the food cooking and his stomach growled. He knew Eustice was making steaks this evening and Wes was looking forward to having a good meal.

When they returned to the barn at the ranch, Shay had never been so happy to get home. She had loved the drive, but after two weeks, she was more than happy to relax for a few days. It was Friday and the shop was closed until Monday. Wes had told her she’d need a few days to recuperate after all the riding.

She glanced over at him to see him scowling at her, and it made her laugh.

“I told you I wasn’t having sex in the tent.”

“Spoilsport. Two weeks, woman. Two *long* weeks,” he growled.

Shay snorted. “It was two weeks for me, too.”

“It didn’t bother you because you’d fall asleep right away. Do you realize how many nights I tried to sleep with a fucking hard-on?”

She burst out laughing. “I’m sorry.”

“I know that’s a lie.”

“I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“I hope so. I’m damn horny, sweetheart.”

She laughed and shook her head. She loved his sense of humor. He could always make her laugh. She was so glad he was in her life.

They rode into the barn, dismounted, and cooled the horses, then Shay removed the saddle and rest of the tack, and carried it into the tack room. She walked out into the aisle again. She

watched Wes remove the tack from Ajax. She could do this all day.

She walked toward him. He looked at her and her heart skipped a beat. She was in so deep with this man.

“Face it. You’re in love with him,” she muttered.

“Are you talking to yourself again?” Wes asked.

“Yep. I’m talking myself into getting in that jacuzzi. Care to join me?”

“I wish I could, but I have work to do.”

“What? You just got home.”

“Shay, sweetheart, a ranch doesn’t stop. There are chores that can’t be put off. I’ll be home later. Once I take you home, I’ll come back and get busy.”

“What else needs done?” She would never understand the workings of a ranch.

“Everything needs be taken care of, feeding, health monitoring, construction, and maintenance work, and miscellaneous duties around the ranch. It’s a never-ending cycle.”

“Okay.” She kissed his lips, then walked out of the barn, across the yard to his truck, and climbed inside. After Wes dropped her off, she removed her flannel shirt, and hung it and her hat on a peg. She’d been so surprised that Wes had bought her a cowboy hat, but she loved it. She loved *him*, but she had no idea how he felt so she’d play it cool for a while until all of this with Lyle was over. God! It had to be over soon. She needed to be able to breathe again.

On Monday, she opened the shop. Wes had brought her to work and left. She wasn’t afraid that Lyle would show up since he wasn’t allowed in the shop. She knew that just rankled him, but she didn’t care. If he dared step inside, she’d call the sheriff’s office.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and her new employee entered.

“Hi, Parker.” Shay smiled.

“Good morning, Shay. How was your trip?”

“It was fun. I hope I can go next year.”

“I’ve never been on a horse in my life.” Parker grinned.

“I hadn’t either. Wes taught me. I really enjoy it now.”

Parker shivered. “I don’t think so.”

Shay laughed. “I said that too. Let me show you the ropes, and we’ll start our day.”

As the day passed, she knew Parker was going to work out just fine. As Shay walked to the door to turn the sign over to *Open*, she looked across the street to see Lyle leaning against a building, staring in her direction, and he didn’t look at all happy. She was sure he was beyond pissed that she’d been gone for two weeks. She’d been hoping he’d give up when he couldn’t find her, but he stuck around. He knew she’d be back.

At lunchtime, Parker told her she was going to the diner for lunch, and Shay asked her to bring her a burger.

As she walked around the shop, she rearranged some items, and when the door opened, she turned around with a smile on her face that died when she saw it was Lyle. She quickly made her way through the displays, but he stepped in front of her.

“Where’s your cowboy now, Shay?”

“You’re not allowed in here, Lyle.”

“I’ll be gone before you get to the phone.” He grasped her arm. “And you’re going with me.”

“Oh, but I’m not. I am not afraid of you.” She jerked her arm from him. “Get out.”

Lyle grabbed her arms, pulled her close, and stared into her eyes.

“I’m taking you with me—” He grunted and fell to his knees when she kicked him in the groin. Then she ran behind the counter, dialed nine-one-one, and watched as he got himself up, and made his way out the door.

Shay asked the operator to send the sheriff or a deputy to the shop. Once Parker returned, Shay told her about Lyle.

“If you’d rather not work here, I understand. He’s not supposed to be in here, but he has the mentality that he can do whatever he wants.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Shay.” Parker smiled at her.

“Thank you.” Shay smiled.

A few minutes later, Nevada entered the shop and glanced around.

“He ran off?”

“Yes. I kicked him in the...” Shay shook her head and noticed Nevada trying not to grin.

“All right. I’m going to look around for him, but he’s pretty good at hiding.” Nevada looked around. “You need to put some cameras up. Not a lot goes on in this town as far as crime, but better safe than sorry.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Not quickly enough, but I doubt he’ll be back today. He’ll hole up with a bag of ice on his crotch.”

Shay laughed. “Good.”

“Call my cell the next time.”

“I will, thank you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nevada grinned, touched the brim of his hat, and walked out.

When Wes picked her up that evening, she introduced him to Parker. Once she left for the day, Shay and Wes locked up, and he drove them home.

“Are you okay? You’re quiet,” Wes said.

“I saw Lyle again today

.”

“Damn it. He’s pushing it.”

“That’s not the worst of it. He went into the shop.”

“Are you serious?” Wes growled. As he listened, Shay told him about Lyle being in the shop and Nevada showing up.

“I want to throttle him.”

“I’m trying not to let him see how much he scares me.”

“Are you all right, other than that, though?”

“Yeah, I’m having cramps. I’m sure my period is about to start.”

“Wonderful,” he muttered, making her laugh.

“You can’t catch a break, can you?”

“It doesn’t seem like it. Since we got back, all you’ve done is sleep and I’ve been suffering.”

“I was so tired, Wes. It took a lot out of me. Once I’m back to my old self, I will make it up to you.”

“I’m fine, Shay. I’m just teasing you.”

A few days later, she stood in the bathroom, staring at the pregnancy stick. She had missed her period. She should have started right after they returned from the cattle drive, but she didn’t. She hoped she wasn’t pregnant. The test stated it would be ready in three minutes, and those were going to be the longest three minutes of her life.

With a deep sigh of resignation, she set the stick on the counter and waited.

After three minutes, Shay stared at the pregnancy stick and groaned.

“Damn it,” she muttered as she tossed it into the trash.

She had to let Wes know. It was his baby too and although they’d never talked about kids, she knew he’d want to know, and it was only fair. Getting up from the edge of the tub, she went in search of him.

She entered the barn to see Maverick heading toward her and sighed. How was a woman supposed to concentrate when so many good-looking cowboys were around?

“Maverick, do you know where Wes is?”

“He’s in the office.” He pointed to a closed door.

“Okay. Thank you. Have a good day.” She smiled.

“Yes, ma’am. You too.” He walked past her and out of the barn.

Taking a deep breath, she walked to the door and knocked. The door opened, and he smiled when he saw her.

God, how was he going to take this?

“Wes, I need to talk to you,” she said, wringing her hands together, and staring into his eyes.

“Sure. Come inside.” He grinned as he opened the door wider.

Shay walked past him and inhaled his aftershave. He always smelled so good. She mentally shook her head. *Keep your head straight.*

“Do you have a few minutes?”

“Of course. Let me take your jacket.” He stepped behind her and helped her from her coat then hung it up, and took her hand and led her to the sofa. “Have a seat.”

She nodded, sat, folded her hands in her lap, and he sat next to her. She was so nervous. *Nervous?* What an understatement. She placed her hand on his, and looked into his eyes.

“Wes...” She cleared her throat.

“What is it, Shay?”

“I, uh... um,” she stammered.

“It can’t be that difficult.” He frowned.

“Oh, it is,” she whispered.

“What?” He tilted his head.

“Nothing.” She sat in silence as she tried to think of a way to tell him. She could *feel* the impatience coming off him.

“Shaylyn,” he snapped.

She took a deep breath, stared into his eyes, and told him.

“I might be pregnant.”

Wes stared at her, and his jaw dropped. He blinked his eyes several times, then cleared his throat.

“Wh-What?”

“I said—” She stopped when he quickly got to his feet.

“I know what you said.” He shook his head, then looked at her. “We always used a condom.”

“They’re not one hundred percent, Wes.”

“Shit,” he muttered as he raked his fingers through his hair and paced. Then he stopped and looked at her. “Weren’t you on birth control? And before you jump on me for that question, it is just that... a question.”

“No. I mean, I was in New York, but I haven’t looked for an OB/GYN here yet.”

Shay watched as he nodded, then continued to walk across the room, turn, and go in the other direction. She wondered what was going through his mind. She knew it wasn’t easy to hear. When she saw the test was positive, she couldn’t believe it as she stared at it.

With a heavy sigh, she stood, walked to him, and placed her hand on his arm. He stopped pacing, again, and looked at her.

“You said, *might* be?”

“The test shows positive, but I’ll make a doctor’s appointment to be sure.”

“You’ll let me know, right?”

“Of course, I will. You have a right to know, Wes.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“I know you’re in shock. I was too, but it will be fine. I’ll take care of it.”

“What do you mean, take care of it?”

“I’ll raise the baby.” She frowned.

Wes sighed. “Oh, good. I thought you meant...”

“Oh! No, I just meant you don’t have to worry about taking care of it.”

“It’s my baby too, Shay. We’ll take care of it together. I want to be a part of my child’s life.”

“I’d love that, Wes. I was hoping you’d be okay after you got used to the news.”

“It’s a shock, but I’m fine. Well, I will be.” He raked his fingers through his hair again, then stared at her. “I think we should get married.”

“No. I will not get married for the sake of the baby. This baby will be loved, Wes. I’d love to have you a part of her life, but I’m not pressuring you.”

“Her?”

Shay grinned. “I’m hoping.”

Wes shook his head. “It’s a boy.”

“We’ll see.”

He took her hands. “Shay, honestly, I don’t care what it is.”

“I feel the same.”

Wes sighed, took her hand, led her back to the couch, and nodded for her to sit, then he sat beside her.

“We’ll be fine.”

“I’m hoping it’s a false positive but those are rare and occur less than one percent of the time.”

Wes sighed. “As I said, we’ll be fine.”

Shay nodded. He was taking it a lot better than she thought he would, but he was a grown man, he probably knew it would do no good to be angry about it. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. It just happened. *If* it happened. She wasn’t sure she wanted to have a baby right now, but she would. Sometimes you just had to go with the flow. Getting angry wouldn’t do either of them any good.

On Sunday, Wes stood in the middle of the yard, entering names and orders into his phone. Why did he ask if the men wanted lunch from the diner? He smiled. Because they did a hell of a job on the cattle drive and for those who stayed behind and worked their asses off, they deserved it too. With a sigh, he headed for the barn to let Warren know he was leaving.

“Warren?” Wes called to his brother when he entered the barn.

“Yeah?” Warren stepped from a stall.

“I’m heading for the diner to pick up lunch. Do you need anything else while I’m in town?”

“No. I’m good. Maybe ask Maverick.”

“I did. Okay, I’ll be back in about an hour.”

“Sounds good. Where’s Shay?”

“In the house, but she said she might come to the barn to visit Petunia.” Wes grinned when Warren chuckled.

“I think Petunia has a new fan.”

“I think you’re right. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“I’ll be around. Be damn careful.” Warren reentered the stall.

Wes strode from the barn, entered his truck, and drove to town. He’d get a burger for Shay too. The good thing was most of the orders were ‘usuals’ so he didn’t have to write much down.

As he drove along the road, he wondered if Newman was still around. No one had seen him for a while. Wes knew he had to be around. There was no way that prick would leave without trying to take Shay, and there was no way Wes would

let him. It was October and Wes hoped Newman left before the weather turned bad or they'd never get rid of him.

He couldn't help but think that Shay could be pregnant. Sure, he'd been shocked at first, but he didn't mind it now. He was in love with her, add in a baby, and it was a bonus.

Wes frowned remembering her telling him she wouldn't get married for the sake of a baby, but that wouldn't be the reason and maybe he needed to tell her that. He'd do that after lunch. He just hoped she felt the same way.

With a heavy sigh, he pulled into the parking lot of the diner, and parked. He stepped from the truck, and looked around. Nothing was going on and since the weather had cooled and tourists were gone, the place looked like a ghost town.

As he walked to the diner, he grinned when he smelled those burgers and onions frying.

He opened the door, and the few people inside waved or called out to him. He took a seat at the counter.

"What can I get you, Wes?" Connie asked him with a smile.

Wes turned his phone toward her and watched her grin.

"Was the cattle drive over last week?"

"Yes, ma'am." Wes grinned.

"I think it's great you do this for your employees, Wes. They work hard on those drives."

"They sure do, Connie. This is just a small thank you."

"Let me get these usuals started then I'll work on the others. Give me about thirty minutes."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be right here."

Connie set a mug on the counter, poured coffee into it, then headed for the kitchen with Wes's phone. He picked up the mug, sipped the hot brew, and waited.

Shay entered the barn, but didn't see anyone. She checked the office, but it was dark, and she wondered where Wes was. Anyone really.

"Hello?" she called out as she walked through the barn. "Where is everyone?"

As she passed the last stall, a hand was placed over her mouth and the one voice she dreaded hearing, whispered in her ear.

"I'm tired of fucking around, Shay. We're leaving now," Lyle grabbed her arm and dragged her through the barn.

"I'm not going anywhere with you. *Let. Go. Of. Me.*" She tried jerking her arm from him, but he had a tight hold on her.

He spun her around, and jerked her close to him.

"Shut up," he shouted.

When Shay screamed and tried to knee him, he pushed her to the floor, and stood over her.

"You're not going to do that again," he snarled.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"I will never leave you alone. Now, get the fuck up. We're leaving." He reached for her arm.

"I don't think you are."

Shay sighed with relief when she saw Warren standing in the doorway of the barn. He folded his arms, leaned against the jamb, stared at Lyle, and didn't take his eyes off him.

"This doesn't concern you, Coleman." Lyle straightened up.

Warren smirked. "Really? You're on my property, without permission, so I'd say it does concern me."

Shay tried to get to her feet, but Lyle pushed her back down with his foot. She slapped his leg, but he didn't budge.

“Where’s your brother? Is he too scared to face me?”

Warren laughed. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Is there a problem here, Warren?”

Shay saw Maverick enter the barn from the other end. Lyle spun around to look at him.

“Who the fuck are you?”

Maverick stepped further into the barn and stopped.

“Not anyone you’d want to fuck with. Let her go.”

“I’m not leaving here without her,” Lyle snarled.

“Oh, I think you are. I called the sheriff,” Warren said.

Lyle grabbed her arm, pulled her to her feet, and glanced back and forth between Warren and Maverick.

“We are going to walk out of here, and neither of you is going to stop me.” Lyle pulled a knife from his pocket, flicked it open, and put it to her throat.

Shay gasped and clutched his arm around her neck. She saw Warren step forward, but he halted when Lyle pressed the knife to her throat. She could feel the blade digging into her skin.

“You harm her, and you’ll never get out of here,” Maverick said as he took a step closer.

“I won’t care. She’d be gone.”

She could feel the blood drain from her face at his words. He would kill her and not give a damn about what happened to him. He’d told her many times he’d die before he let her leave him. In any way.

She put her hand up to stop either man from getting closer. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, blew out a breath, and looked at Warren.

“I’ll go—”

“Shay, no.” Warren took a step forward but stopped when Shay shook her head.

“Please. Lyle, I’ll go.”

“I knew you’d come to your senses.” He looked at the men. “I told you I wasn’t leaving without her. Call the sheriff back and tell him you made a mistake.” When Warren didn’t move, Lyle shouted. “Now!”

Shay watched Warren sigh as he took his cellphone from his pocket, and put the phone to his ear.

“Sam? It’s Warren. Never mind. I... made a mistake. Thanks anyway.” He put the phone back into his pocket, and sneered. “Happy now?”

“I’ll be happy once we’re out of here, and away from you damn cowboys.”

Shay was terrified. She knew if she left with him, she’d never be heard from again. She had pushed him way past pissed.

“What the fuck is going on?” Wes said when he entered the barn.

“There he is. Your man is finally here, Shay, but he’s too late. We’re walking out of here.”

“You’ll have to go through me,” Wes snarled.

“You move and I’ll cut her throat,” Lyle yelled. “You think I won’t? She is leaving here one way or another. Get out of the way, Coleman.”

Shay saw the anger in Wes’s face as he clenched his fists. He looked at her, and she begged him with her eyes to let them go. He slightly shook his head.

“You harm one hair on her head, and I will bury you,” Wes growled.

Lyle laughed. “You won’t do anything as long as I have this knife—”

His words ended when they were both taken to the ground, and she had the wind knocked out of her. Someone pushed her out of the way as all three men got Lyle on the ground. She was sure it had been Maverick to make a move first.

She lay on the floor trying to catch her breath. It hurt to breathe. She saw Wes punch Lyle in the face, making his nose bleed. As she rolled to her back, she saw the sheriff's SUV cruiser pull up, then Sam ran into the barn, followed by Nevada Shelton and Brody Morgan. They pulled Wes off Lyle, then she saw Wes shake his hand to alleviate the pain in his knuckles, no doubt. Sam rolled Lyle onto his stomach, handcuffed him, and pulled him to his feet.

"I'm going to enjoy this," Sam said as he led him away, reading him his rights.

"Shay? Are you okay?" Wes asked as he knelt beside her.

"Yes. Just had the wind knocked out of me."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Rogers, but I had to take the opportunity to take him down," Maverick said.

"It's fine, and please, call me Shay. I appreciate what you did, Maverick."

"Yes, ma'am." He touched the brim of his hat, and walked from the barn with Sam.

When Sam reentered the barn, he knelt beside her.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. He only scared me with that knife."

"He's going away for a while."

"I'm glad you ignored my call, Sam," Warren said.

"I knew you were being forced to call. I could hear it in your voice. We came in silent because I didn't want him to know we were on the way."

"I appreciate it, Sam." Shay held her hand out to Wes and he helped her to her feet.

"It's our job, Shay. He'll be booked for intimidation. A person convicted of the offense of intimidation will be imprisoned in the state prison for any term not to exceed ten years or be fined an amount not to exceed fifty thousand dollars, or both."

“I hope he goes away for a very long time,” Shay said.

“Well, with the intimidation threat, and holding a knife on you, plus all the other shit he’s done, he won’t be around for a while. I’ll do my damndest to make sure of that.”

“Good.” Wes wrapped his arms around her, placed his cheek on her head, and just held her, and she welcomed his support.

“Are you all right, Wes?”

“Of course, sweetheart. He didn’t hit me.”

“But your hand...”

“I’ll have some bruised knuckles, but I’ll be fine. It was worth it.”

A week had passed since Lyle had been arrested and Shay was so happy he was gone. She grinned when she thought about telling her uncle about it.

“That’s great. I’m sorry you went through that, but I’m so glad it’s over.”

“Me too, Uncle Lou. I can finally walk around without fear of him showing up.”

“You’ll be happy now with Wes. Newman is no longer hanging over your head.”

What would her uncle think if she was pregnant? She shook her head. He’d stand by her. Her appointment with Dr. Anderson was in two days and she was so nervous. Her period hadn’t started yet, and she was pretty certain she was pregnant. Especially after losing her breakfast this morning to the porcelain throne.

She told Wes she wanted to take care of Petunia, so she was mucking out the stall. She had her earbuds in and sang along with Reba McEntire singing *Fancy* as she moved to the music.

When she spun around, she saw Wes leaning against the doorjamb. Her face turned beet red.

“I know I can’t sing.”

“Is that what that was? I thought a couple of barn cats were fighting.” He grinned, but it left his face when she tossed the rake down and ran toward him. He took off running, but stopped, turned, and caught her in his arms, then kissed her lips.

“I’m teasing, but the dancing was good. The singing? Don’t give up your day job.”

She laughed, kissed his lips, and returned to the stall. Once she finished, she was going to relax. Her muscles still ached from all the riding, but she wouldn’t change any of it for the world. She turned to see him in the doorway again, staring at her and she wondered what was going through his head. He walked toward her, took her hand, and led her to the hay bales, and motioned for her to sit.

“Shay, I’ve been thinking about the baby.”

She tensed, afraid to hear what he was about to say.

“What about it?”

“When I said we should get married you said you wouldn’t do it for the sake of the baby. I agree with that, but darlin’, it isn’t for the sake of the baby. It would be for the sake of love. I love you, Shay. I wanted you to know before we find out, one hundred percent, that you’re pregnant. That way, you know, *I’m* not doing it for the sake of the baby.”

“Wes? You love me?”

“Yes. I think I have since the first time we had sex. I want to spend my life with you, on this ranch. I want our children to grow up here and take pride in what we do. I love you,” he said, cupping her face in his hands.

“I love you too,” she whispered. “I was so afraid to love you. Not that I thought you were anything like Lyle, but because he was around, and I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“He can’t hurt me, Shay. The only time he would is if he hurt you. I about died when I saw him holding that knife to your throat. My only regret is that I didn’t get to kick the hell out of him. I got a couple of good shots in though.”

“I wasn’t going without a fight.”

“I know. You’ve come a long way and I think it surprised him that you did.”

“I have a doctor appointment soon. We’ll know then.”

“Are you okay with it, if you are?”

“Oh, yes. At first, I was scared. I wasn’t sure how you’d take it, but after giving it some thought, I can’t wait for her to arrive.”

“Him.”

“We’ll see, but as you said, we will love it no matter what.”

“You are right about that.”

“I’m going to head inside. You look like you could use a shower.” She grinned.

“I could, but I have to finish my chores first, then I’ll be in, and we can shower together.”

“Sounds good to me, cowboy. See you soon.”

She strode from the barn but before going out into the sunshine, she turned, blew him a kiss, then continued to her vehicle. She was so happy, she couldn’t keep the smile off her face.

Weston Coleman was her life and she’d love him forever and a day, and she knew he felt the same. Life was finally good, and she couldn’t wait to meet their little girl, she thought with a grin as she entered the SUV, then drove to the house.

The day of her doctor appointment, she walked out of the office, and stood on the sidewalk. After glancing up and down the street, she headed for her shop, and entered.

“Hi, how did the appointment go?” Parker asked her.

Shay shook her head. “I’m not pregnant. It seems that stress was making me miss my period,” her voice cracked.

“I’m so sorry, but you can try again, Shay.”

“Yeah, I know. I was so excited. I hope Wes is okay with it.”

“Of course, he will be. He loves you. I don’t know either of you very well, yet, but I can see you love each other. This is just a small step back.”

“You’re right. I think he’ll be fine. In fact, I’m going to go to my office and call him. Can you cover out here for a few more minutes?”

“Of course.”

Shay smiled, walked along the hallway, and entered her office. After closing the door, she sat at her desk, found Wes’s number on her phone, and called him. As it rang, she wondered how this would go. She couldn’t get over how disappointed she was that she wasn’t pregnant.

“Hey, darlin’,” he said, sounding out of breath.

“What are you doing?”

“Chasing a damn calf.”

Shay grinned, then sobered. “Wes?”

“Tell me, Shay.”

She blew out her breath. “I’m not pregnant.” Silence met her. “Wes?”

“I’m here. I’m sorry, sweetheart, but we can have kids later. Let’s spend some time together first.”

“I wanted to be pregnant, Wes,” she choked back tears.

“I know, and I was hoping too, but it’s not the end of the world, darlin’. We will have kids. As many as you want.”

“Ten is a nice round number,” she teased.

“You’re the one who has to pop them out. I just do the fun part.”

She laughed. “We’ll both have fun making them.”

“Definitely. Are you okay, though? Really?”

“I am, since talking with you. I’d better get back to work. I’ll see you later.”

“Shay?”

“Yes?”

“Move in with me. You’re there all the time anyway.”

“I’d love to. I’ll let Connie know I’ll be moving out. I know Parker is looking for a place, I’ll tell her about the apartment.”

“Sounds good, baby. I’ll see you at home later. We can move you this weekend.”

“See you later.” She disconnected and couldn’t keep the smile off her face as she entered the showroom.

“I take it by that smile that he took it well?”

“He did. I’m going to move in with him. If you’re still looking for a place, talk to Connie about the apartment above the diner. It’s a great little place.”

“I will. Thank you.” Parker smiled at her.

Shay was happy that Parker was working out. They hadn’t talked a lot, but she sensed a sadness in Parker’s eyes and wondered what had happened to put it there. It was none of her business, but she’d been there with Lyle and since knowing how it felt to be free of him, she wanted others to be happy too.

It was silly, she knew that, but almost everyone deserved to be happy. Almost. Some were just evil people who didn’t deserve any type of happiness. Lyle Newman for one.

Wes put his phone back into his pocket, nudged Ajax, and rode after the calf. He was disappointed that Shay wasn’t

pregnant, but as he told her, they could always have kids later.

He grinned as he thought of her moving in with him. He wanted her close to him, and he'd help her pack and move. He loved having her in his home with him.

Wes knew she was disappointed in not being pregnant too. But she did seem better right before they hung up. He wanted her happy and he'd do whatever he could to make sure that happened.

He wanted to marry her, but he wasn't sure how to bring that subject up. He didn't know if she'd think it was too soon or not. They'd been together for months, and to him, that was more than long enough to know he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

After finishing up for the day, he drove home, parked, and entered the house. It was quiet.

"Shay?" he called as he removed his hat, hung it on a peg, then removed his coat. The weather had drastically changed in just twenty-four hours. The temperatures had dropped very quickly, and it was damn cold out.

He was torn between enjoying a hot shower and finding Shay first. He toed off his boots, placed them in the mudroom, and set off to locate her. He discovered her slumbering on the couch. He perched himself on the edge of the sofa, lightly touching her cheek, rousing her from her sleep. Her eyes opened, gazing upon him with a lovely smile, making his heart skip a beat.

"I fell asleep," she said as she sat up, and brushed her hair from her face.

"I didn't mean to wake you. I wanted to let you know that I'm going to grab a shower."

"Okay. What do you want to eat?"

"Sandwiches are fine, sweetheart, but I'll make them. I think we're both worn out."

"I think the cattle drive is still knocking me on my ass."

Wes grinned. "Probably. I'll be right back."

“Okay.”

He kissed her lips, stood, and walked to his bedroom, then entered the bathroom, and stripped off his clothes.

When he stepped inside the stall, he groaned at the hot water hitting his chilled skin. He jerked in surprise when the door opened, and Shay stepped inside. She took the soap from the dish, rubbed it between her hands to make suds, then washed him. He stared into her eyes as she moved her hands over him.

“Have you ever had shower sex?” she asked him, then shook her head. “No. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“Anyone who came before you no longer matters, Shaylyn Rogers. You are the only woman I want in my life. I want you to marry me, have children with me, and live on this ranch with me. You’re all I want in this life.”

He watched her blink her eyes quickly, but a tear rolled down her cheek.

“I love you, Wes. I want all of that too.”

Wes quickly blinked tears from his eyes. He never thought he’d find someone and he sure as hell never thought he’d love someone so much. He couldn’t imagine not having her in his life.

“Shay, I’ll always love you. I promise.” He pressed his lips to hers and moaned when her arms slipped around his waist. She raised her lips.

“I promise too.”

Later, as he held her while she slept, he couldn’t stop smiling. Tomorrow, he wanted to make plans to get married. The sooner, the better for him, but if she wanted to plan a big wedding, he’d be fine with that. He’d make sure she nor their children would want for nothing. It could only get better from here, he thought as he drifted off.

The following morning, Wes entered the barn to see Warren strolling down the aisle.

“Hey,” he called out and watched his brother turn to face him.

“Wes. A little chilly this morning.” Warren pulled on a pair of work gloves.

“It is. What are you doing out here?”

“What? I can’t come into my own barn?” Warren’s eyebrow rose.

Wes grinned. “Not what I meant. You’re usually working inside.”

“I’ll be heading back in soon. I just wanted to work out here a little.”

Wes tilted his head. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. How are you and Shay doing?”

“Great. We’re going to get married.”

Warren’s face lit up in a grin.

“No shit?”

“No shit. I told her last night—”

“Wait. You... *told* her?”

“In a way. I told her I wanted to marry her, and she said she wanted that too.” He shrugged.

“I see. Well, I’m happy for you both.”

“Thanks. I’d like you to be my best man.”

“I’d be honored. I had a feeling you’d beat me to the altar.”

“You need to find a good woman now, Warren.”

“Wes, I look all the time. I don’t have any luck finding her. I want what Mom and Dad have, and now you and Shay. I don’t want my part of the ranch to end. I know you’ll take care of it, but I’ve worked my ass off to get it where it is. I’d hate to see my part end with me.”

“You won’t. You’ll find the right woman.”

“Better be soon. The next birthday is a big one.”

“Still plenty of time. She’ll turn up when you least expect her to, like me with Shay. I sure wasn’t looking to fall in love with her when I first saw her, but man, there was something there.” He shrugged. “I love her.”

“I know you do, and like I said, I’m happy for both of you.” Warren grinned and entered a stall. “I’d better get to work. The bosses around here can be pains in the ass.”

Wes chuckled as he strode through the barn and out the other end. He wanted to check the schedule for today and get to work. The sooner he got done, the sooner he could be with Shay.

Epilogue

Shay smiled as she watched Wes chasing after a calf running from the herd. Another year, and another cattle drive. If someone had told her she'd fall in love with a rancher in Montana, she would have thought they were crazy. But she had. There was nothing in this world that would make her leave him or the ranch. This was her life now, and she wouldn't change it for the world.

She grinned when she saw Maverick riding alongside the herd, slapping a coiled rope against his thigh, just as Wes and Warren were doing. She glanced around and saw Charlotte and Robert toward the back, laughing together. She hoped that was the type of relationship she and Wes would have. She couldn't wait to marry him.

Shay nudged Petunia into a run, and rode alongside the herd to where Wes was. He saw her, grinned, turned Ajax in her direction, and rode toward her.

“Hey, sweetheart. Are you doing all right?”

“Yep. Are we stopping soon?”

“Yeah. Over the next knoll. Why? Does your ass hurt?” He grinned.

“If I say yes, will you massage it?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“You're so easy, cowboy.”

“Only with you, baby. Only with you. Seriously, are you okay?”

“I'm fine. My ass has adjusted to being in the saddle.”

Wes laughed. “Glad to hear it. Although, I'd massage it either way. I'd do that for you.”

“How sweet. You'd get nothing out of it, would you?” she teased.

He leaned close, kissed her lips, and stared into her eyes.

“Nothing you couldn’t cure, darlin’.”

“You could cure any ache I have, Weston Coleman.”

“Right back atcha.” He glanced around. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving. It’s been a long time since breakfast.”

“We’ll eat soon.”

“Okay. I want to talk to you when you have a minute.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No. I just want to talk to you.”

“About?”

“After we stop.”

“Damn it, woman. Now you’re going to drive me nuts.”

Shay laughed. “It will be a few minutes, Wes. Damn, when did you become so impatient?”

“When I met you. All right, I’ll wait a few minutes.” He shook his head, nudged Ajax, and ran after another straggler.

Shay nibbled on her lower lip. Would he be okay with what she wanted to talk to him about? She hoped so. Their wedding was next month, and she was so excited, but she needed to talk with Wes.

Wes glanced over his shoulder at her and wondered what was going on. They were getting married next month, and he was more than ready, but something was bothering her. She was showing a brave face, but he knew her well enough to know that something was on her mind, and he just prayed it wasn’t that she wanted to postpone the wedding, or God forbid, cancel it. He wanted to marry her and start on those kids. He wasn’t getting any younger and he wanted to raise his

kids to love this ranch and keep it going, but if she was having doubts... he shook his head.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he muttered.

After everyone finished eating, his stomach was in knots. He looked at her to see her talking with Maverick, and she seemed fine. What was there to talk about?

“You’re going to drive yourself insane,” he murmured as he got to his feet.

He walked to where she was sitting and sat on the log beside her.

“Are you getting enough to eat?”

“Yes. I don’t know what it is about the outdoors making you hungry, but it does.”

“Fresh air will do that,” Maverick said as he stood, and walked to the trash to throw his empty paper plate away.

“He’s so quiet.”

“He doesn’t say much, unless he needs to.” Wes took her hand in his. “Shay? Tell me what’s wrong?”

“Wrong? Nothing’s wrong, Wes.”

“No?”

“Nope.”

He blew out a relieved breath. “I was sure you were going to tell me you wanted to postpone or call off the wedding.”

“What? Why would you think that? I love you and want nothing more than to marry you.”

“I know you, Shay. I know something is on your mind.”

She sighed, set her paper plate on the ground, glanced around, then squeezed his hand and leaned close to him.

“I’m pregnant.”

“*What?* Are you sure?”

“Absolutely, positive. I saw Dr. Anderson before coming on this trip. I wanted to make sure, if I was pregnant, that I

would be able to come on the drive.”

Wes stared at her, shot to his feet, picked her up, and spun her around while he whooped and hollered. She burst out laughing. He set her on her feet, kissed her lips, then looked around to see everyone watching them.

“We’re pregnant,” he shouted, and everyone cheered.

“You’re okay with it?”

“Definitely. I know we wanted to wait, but I’m happy, Shay. Are you?”

“Ecstatic.”

He pulled her to him and held her. He never thought he’d find this kind of love. He hoped he never had to live without her. This love he had for her would never die. He knew that for certain. He also knew she felt the same. Now they were having a baby, and he couldn’t be happier.

When everyone surrounded them and hugged them, Wes laughed. His parents were so happy, and Warren looked proud to becoming an uncle.

“God, I love you so much, Shaylyn.”

“And I love you, Weston.”

There wasn’t much that could make this better, until they added more kids, and he was all for that. Why wouldn’t he be? He’d found the love of his life and now knew why he hadn’t before. He’d been waiting for this woman, and he was so glad he had.

*** The End ***

More Books by Susan

Men of Clifton, Montana Series:

JAKE

GABE

BRODY

WYATT

RYDER

RILEY

SAM

BONNER

TRENT

PRESTON

REECE

HOLT

CASH

GRANT

CORD

CALDER

TRICK

NEVADA

COLSON
BOONE
NOAH
DOMINIC
WILDER
LANDRY
NICK
RAND
WADE
RHETT
BRETT
LIAM
HANK

Bad Boys of Dry River, Wyoming series:

LUCAS
MONTGOMERY
COOPER
LINCOLN
DAKOTA
STORM

MICAH

The Callahan series:

A COWBOY FOR CHRISTMAS

A COWBOY OF HER OWN

A COWBOY'S HEART

A COWBOY TAKES A CHANCE

The Beckett Brothers series:

BRAYDEN

ASH

JESSE

GAGE

GRAYSON

