

A man with a beard and a black cowboy hat stands in a field. He is wearing a blue suit jacket over a light blue button-down shirt. The background shows a wooden fence and a line of trees under a blue sky with some clouds.

ONE STEAMY
NIGHT

BRENDA JACKSON

MILLS & BOON
Desire

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Brenda Jackson

MILLS & BOON

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ONE STEAMY NIGHT

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

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

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

“Jackson’s trademark ability to weave multiple characters and side stories together makes shocking truths all the more exciting.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“There is no getting away from the sex appeal and charm of Jackson’s Westmoreland family.”

—*RT Book Reviews on Feeling the Heat*

“What is it with these Westmoreland men? Each is sexier and more charming than the one before.... Hot, sexy, smart and romantic, this story has it all.”

—*RT Book Reviews on The Proposal*

“Jackson has a talent for creating the sexiest men and pairing them off against feisty females. This story has everything a hot romance should have.”

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“Is there anything more irresistible than a man so in love with a woman that he’s willing to give her what she believes is her heart’s desire? The Westmoreland clan will claim even more fans with this entry.”

—*RT Book Reviews on What a Westmoreland Wants*

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

A man that hath friends must shew himself
friendly: and there is a friend that
sticketh closer than a brother.

—*Proverbs 18:24*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In loving memory of my childhood friend
and Delta Sigma Theta Soror, Lynda Ravnell.
Losing you was hard, and I will forever
appreciate the memories. Rest in peace.

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Prologue

Jaxon Ravel threw out a card before glancing around the crowded room. Including himself, there were over fifty men in attendance at the first ever Westmoreland Poker Tournament. Some were men who were born a Westmoreland or who, like the Outlaws, were cousins of the Westmorelands. Then there were those who'd married into the family. All were accounted for and all but four players had been eliminated from the game. Those were the ones who were either sitting around observing or hanging out at the bar. An assortment of whiskeys were in decanters and everyone was helping themselves. There was also beer in a huge refrigerator.

The room was quiet for now. Storm Westmoreland was no longer cursing, which meant he was either holding a good hand or he wanted the three others seated at the table with him to assume he was. The room where the game was being played was the spacious poker room, located on the third floor of Westmoreland House.

Westmoreland House was the three-story building Dillon Westmoreland had built on his property, located in what the locals in Denver referred to as Westmoreland Country. Because the Westmorelands were big on family and enjoyed get-togethers, the building contained a humongous kitchen on the ground floor and a huge banquet room with the capacity to seat anywhere from two to five hundred people.

There was also a theater room for the ladies to watch movies, as well as a huge playroom for the younger children that resembled an indoor playground. Not to be overlooked, the teens had their own game room equipped with arcade consoles, mounted televisions, pinball machines, pool tables, board games and a refrigerator stocked with energy drinks.

The entire third floor belonged to the men. That's where the bar, pool tables, man cave and sleeping quarters for overnight poker games were located. Jaxon thought this was a nice setup. The beginning of the tournament required several games going on at once and this room was spacious enough to accommodate everyone. There was a men-only rule and food had been catered by a restaurant in town.

It was close to midnight now, and this was night two of the tournament. Over the past year he'd gotten to know all the Westmorelands, those based out of Atlanta, Montana, Texas, California and Denver. And he was building a bond with his newfound cousins, the Outlaws.

Since the Outlaws and their Westmoreland cousins were such a close-knit group, Jaxon had been included as an honorary member of the Westmoreland family. As an only child, he wasn't used to a huge family, but he was finding out just how such a family operated, thanks to the Westmorelands and the Outlaws. Getting to know all of them, which included the wives and husbands who'd married into the family, had been overwhelming at first. Now he felt comfortable and at ease around them.

More than anything, he appreciated their acceptance of him as one of them. That was the main reason he figured here at the tournament was just as good a place as any for the announcement he needed to make. He wasn't sure how the men would take what he had to say, but he wanted to be up front and honest with them, and then let the chips fall where they may.

Another hour passed before the intensity of the game lessened as King Jamal Yasir of Tehran, who was married to Delaney Westmoreland, told everyone about the new school that had been built in his country. When he'd finished talking, Jaxon decided to make his announcement in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone.

"Just so all of you know, I plan to marry Nadia."

Like he figured it would, the room became quiet. More than fifty pairs of eyes stared at him. At first no one said anything, and then his cousin, Senator Jess Outlaw, the only one who'd been privy to Jaxon's plan, made sure everyone's mind was free of confusion by asking, "Nadia Novak?"

Jaxon fought back a grin. That was the only Nadia he knew and would guess that was the only one the others knew as well. "Yes, Nadia Novak."

"I didn't know you and Nadia were seeing each other," Zane Westmoreland said after taking a sip of his brandy.

"We aren't."

"Then how are you going to marry her? What's your plan of action?" Derringer Westmoreland asked.

A slow smile broke across Jaxon's lips. "A very serious courtship."

"Good luck with that," his cousin Maverick Outlaw said. "I think all of us have heard Nadia say more than once that she plans to stay single for a long time. Possibly forever."

“Hey, that’s what Gemma claimed,” Callum Austell said in his strong Australian accent. “It took me three years, but I eventually won her heart.”

Jaxon had heard the story of how Ramsey Westmoreland’s best friend from Australia had come to Denver to help Ramsey start his sheep farm. One day he had seen Ramsey’s sister Gemma and what had been intended as a one-year trip to America for Callum had become three. It had taken the man that long to win Gemma over.

“I don’t have three years,” Jaxon said. “I want to marry Nadia before New Year’s.” He knew that was a big initiative given this was August.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Nadia doesn’t like overconfident men,” Canyon Westmoreland said, grinning.

Jaxon noticed several others nodding their heads in agreement. “I don’t consider myself an overconfident man. Just a self-assured one.”

“You’re also a very disciplined one, but with Nadia it won’t matter,” Stern Westmoreland piped in to say. “I suggest you think things through, Jaxon. Trying to win Nadia over might be taking on a little too much. I love her to death but she’s a renegade. She’s headstrong, opinionated and sassy.”

“Sounds like she hung around Bailey too long.” Walker Rafferty grinned, commenting on his wife. “At least I’ve never heard Nadia use any curse words.”

Jaxon raised a brow. “Bailey curses?” He couldn’t imagine such a thing of the woman he’d gotten to know.

Laughter broke out around the room. Hilarious laughter. “Worse than a sailor,” Ramsey Westmoreland said, taking a sip of his drink. Jaxon figured Ramsey should know since he was Bailey’s oldest brother. “Bailey would use curse words not even in the English language,” Ramsey kept on. “You wouldn’t believe how many times Dillon and I had to wash her mouth out with soap. Now we let Walker deal with it.”

Jaxon had heard how the parents, the aunts and uncles of the Denver Westmorelands had died in a plane crash over twenty years ago, leaving Dillon, the oldest cousin and Ramsey, who was next to the oldest, with a family of fifteen. Several of the siblings and cousins had been under sixteen at the time. When the state of Colorado tried forcing Dillon to put the youngest in foster homes, he had refused.

Walker chuckled. “Now that we have kids of our own, Bailey’s gotten a whole lot better and rarely says a curse word. Thank God.”

“So, in other words,” Sloan Outlaw said, “Nadia will be a challenge you

might not want to take on, cuz. We've seen her give more than one guy the boot. We'd hate for you to be the next."

Jaxon didn't say anything for a minute as he glanced around the room and met each man's gaze. "I am very much aware that Nadia has a strong personality. However, I don't have any choice about taking Nadia on. I've fallen in love with her."

Words like "damn," "crap" and "shit" escaped several of the men's lips.

"Have you taken the time to get to know her?" Riley Westmoreland asked.

"No, but it doesn't matter. I fell in love with her the moment we were introduced. But then that's how things work in the Ravel family."

"They work that way in the Austell family, too, so I know where you're coming from," Callum said, grinning. "Falling in love for some men might be a slow and reluctant process, but for me it was automatic. I fell in love with Gemma the moment Ramsey introduced us."

"It was that way for me, as well," Dylan Emanuel said. He'd become the most recent addition to the Westmoreland family when he'd married Charm Outlaw ten months ago. "I'm a firm believer in love at first sight."

"That's all well and good, but I'm not sure five months will give you enough time to grow on Nadia. She can be stubborn," Reggie Westmoreland, the other senator in the family, said.

Jaxon leaned back in his chair. "I believe it can be done...without any interference from any of you."

"As long as you don't plan to do anything illegal or break her heart."

It was the first time Dillon had spoken. Any input from Dillon meant a lot since Nadia was his wife Pam's youngest sister. Jaxon knew Nadia was not just Dillon's sister-in-law, but that he also considered her the baby sister he never had since his parents had had six boys.

"I won't do anything illegal, and I won't break her heart. I just need all of you to know my intentions. And like I said, I prefer no interference."

"That means we can't tell our wives," Thorn Westmoreland said. "That shouldn't be a problem. We abide by the rule that whatever we say in this room stays in this room."

All the men agreed. However, Dillon said, "I'm telling Pam. Nadia is her youngest sister and I feel she has a right to know. Don't worry about her interfering because she won't. She knew about Aidan and Jill and didn't interfere with them."

Jill was another of Pam's younger sisters. Jaxon had been told of Aidan

and Jill's secret love affair during medical school. Little had they known that Pam and Dillon had been fully aware of what was going on between them.

"You and Pam were too perceptive," Aidan said, grinning over at Dillon.

"Some things just can't be hidden," Dillon responded. He glanced back at Jaxon. "I'm trusting you to do the right thing by Nadia."

"And I will, I promise you. Like I said, I want her to be my wife and will do my best to win her over."

"Well, just be prepared that with Nadia, your best might not be good enough," Durango Westmoreland said, shaking his head. "To be honest, Nadia isn't the one I'm worried about."

"Same with me," Stone Westmoreland said, laughing. "In other words, Jaxon, we'll be here to help tend to your bruises when Nadia gives you the boot."

Jaxon actually saw a look of pity in a number of the men's eyes. Even Dillon's.

"You guys aren't scaring me any," Jaxon said, laughing and tossing out another card.

"Don't say we didn't warn you," Jared Westmoreland said, smiling.

At that time, King Jamal Yasir, who'd acted as dealer, went around the table to ask each player if they wanted to bet or call. No one raised the bet, and they began showing their hands.

Everybody groaned loudly when Jamal proclaimed Storm Westmoreland the winner of the tournament.

One

A month later

“Did you hear us, Nadia?”

Nadia Novak rubbed her temples and wished she hadn't heard what her sisters Jillian and Paige had said. Jaxon Ravel was in Gamble scouting out land to expand his business. Why? Hadn't he bought enough land last year in Forbes, Texas, for the same reason? Besides, it wasn't like Gamble was a major city in Wyoming, even if it had grown in population over the past few years.

When her oldest sister, Pam, had married Dillon Westmoreland fifteen years ago and packed up a thirteen-year-old Nadia, a fifteen-year-old Paige and a seventeen-year-old Jillian to live with them on his huge spread in Denver called Westmoreland Country, Gamble had been a town with a population of barely five thousand. There had been only one hotel, few fast food places and a theater that showed movies months after they were released.

Now thanks to a progressive mayor, Gamble's population had quadrupled. There were several hotels and theaters and a slew of fast food places. Sprawling housing developments had sprouted up as well as a megamall. With rumors circulating about a possible ski resort coming in about five years, Nadia figured one day Gamble would be as popular as Jackson Hole.

Years ago, her great-grandfather Jay Novak Sr. had purchased the two-hundred-acre spread that he named the Novak Homestead. More than anything, she appreciated her sister Pam for not selling it when they'd moved to Denver. She'd retained it as part of their family legacy.

Nadia didn't regret moving back to Gamble. She would admit it got lonely here at times, living in this huge house by herself. There had never been a boring moment in Westmoreland Country with so many Westmorelands living close by each other. It helped, too, that since Denver was only an hour's flight away, she often returned to Westmoreland Country for visits.

Her sister Jillian, who was fondly called Jill, was a neurosurgeon and was

happily living in Florida with her cardiologist husband, Aidan Westmoreland. Nadia thought it was awesome that her sisters—Pam and Jill—had married Westmoreland men who were cousins.

Her sister Paige had followed in Pam's footsteps to become an actress in Hollywood. She'd made a name for herself and had starred in several movies. Paige hadn't hesitated to give up the glitz and glamor to marry Senator Jess Outlaw. Jess was a cousin to the Westmorelands, and he and Paige made their home in the nation's capital.

Nadia had attended the University of Wyoming for four years, before graduating from Harvard with an MBA. She had returned to Gamble three years ago. The timing had been perfect since the acting school her sister Pam owned, the Dream Makers Acting Academy, had been in need of someone to manage it. Nadia loved her job and found it rewarding as well as challenging.

Over the past year the student count at the academy had increased substantially, mainly because of Pam's contacts back in Hollywood. Oftentimes an actor friend would teach a class for a semester or two, or would do a once-in-a-lifetime symposium or workshop. Last year they'd added classes for aspiring stuntmen taught by folks from Hollywood. The academy was now in demand and already there was a waiting list for the next school year.

Although Nadia and her sisters now lived thousands of miles apart, they would carve out time to share a conversation or two at least once a week. Because of Pam's hectic schedule, she would jump on the call whenever she could. Although Pam was twelve years older than Jill, fourteen years older than Paige and sixteen years older than Nadia, the four of them were extremely close.

"Nadia, are you listening to us?"

"No," she said honestly. They'd lost her after mentioning Jaxon's name and that he was in Gamble to scope out land. The idea of them being in the same town was troubling. There was no way she would tell her sisters the impact the man had had on her from their initial meeting. For some reason, she couldn't shake off her intense attraction to him. What was pathetic was that whenever their paths crossed, he barely seemed to notice she existed.

Except for that one time at Charm's wedding last year. They'd held a pretty long conversation. Nadia figured the reason had been he'd been too kind to walk away when the others in the group had dispersed, leaving them alone.

“Well, get your mind off the acting school for a minute,” Jill said.

Nadia had news for them. Her mind had not been on the acting school, although maybe it should have been since she was in a dilemma. The new school year had begun two weeks ago and yesterday the sponsor for this year’s holiday play, the Dunnings Financial Group, had filed for bankruptcy. That meant she needed to find another sponsor and fast. The students had returned energized and ready to start work on the play. Auditions were already being held.

“Okay, what did I miss?” Nadia asked, turning her attention to the conversation with her sisters.

“You didn’t make a comment when we told you how to treat Jaxon.”

She frowned. “And just how am I supposed to treat him?”

“We want you to be hospitable to him, Nadia,” Paige said.

Hospitable? “Why wouldn’t I be? I don’t recall being any other way around him.”

“When you’re not trying to avoid him. And what’s up with that?” Jill asked.

Nadia rolled her eyes. Leave it to Jill to notice. “I just don’t see the need to fawn over him like the rest of you do.”

If only they knew that, in private, she did more than fawn over him. She had naughty thoughts that actually made her panties wet. Not to mention those dreams she had of him, the contents of which would probably give her sisters a stroke.

“We don’t fawn over him, Nadia,” Paige defended. “We just think highly of him for what he did. Can you imagine what would have happened if he had not come forward with that information on Phire’s father?”

Phire was married to Maverick Outlaw, the youngest brother of Paige’s husband. Nadia had never met Phire’s father, but she’d heard about all the money he’d swindled from the Outlaws for close to twenty-five years.

“And?” Nadia braced herself knowing her sisters were about to sing Jaxon Ravel’s praises.

“And,” Paige continued, “Jaxon is the Outlaws’ newfound cousin, and the Westmoreland family has embraced him as one of theirs, so you know what that means.”

Yes, she knew. The Westmorelands and Outlaws were now one big happy family. Heck, her three sisters were married to Westmorelands and an Outlaw, which made them official members of the clan. “Like I said, I’m

always pleasant to Jaxon, but I refuse to fawn over him.” But she had no problem drooling in private.

“Well, please don’t cause problems, Nadia. You can be rather hard on men and for no reason,” Jill said.

* * *

A deep frown settled on Nadia’s face as she leaned back in her chair. “I have plenty of reasons whenever I’m hard on a man. Should I remind you about Kemp, Paige?”

Kemp had been Paige’s actor boyfriend who’d made news when he’d betrayed her with another actress while filming a movie. The news had caused a scandal that had taken social media by storm.

“And the three of us can’t ever forget Fletcher Mallard and what he tried to do,” she added.

Fletcher had been engaged to marry Pam with devious intentions. Luckily Dillon had arrived on the scene and put an end to that foolishness. He’d stopped Pam and Fletcher’s wedding ceremony just in the nick of time.

“Those are just two men, Nadia. You can’t judge the entire male population by them,” Jill said.

In all honesty, there were three. One she’d never told her sisters about. Namely Benson Cummings. He was a guy she’d met during her first year at the University of Wyoming. He’d been a senior and she’d thought she was in love until she’d discovered her name was on a Freshmen Girls to Do list. A list circulated by senior guys, and Benson had been assigned to do her. She was grateful she’d found out about the list before sleeping with him.

“Just think of all the Westmoreland and Outlaw men and how wonderful they are,” Paige tacked on for good measure.

“Okay, I will admit they’re one of a kind,” Nadia said. “But then I’m partial where they are concerned. I don’t know Jaxon Ravel that well.”

In truth, she didn’t know him at all. She only knew how he made her feel whenever he was around her. Just being in the same room with him reminded her that she was a woman. A woman whose body sizzled every time she saw him. That was a reaction she’d rather do without and that was the primary reason she avoided him.

“Well, now is your chance to get to know him since he’ll be in Gamble for a while.”

Nadia's frown deepened. "How long is 'a while'?"

"He told Jess he planned to be there for at least three months," Paige said. "Possibly four."

"Why don't you invite him to dinner?" Jill suggested. "You love to cook and always complain about wanting to prepare all those dishes but having no one there to eat them."

They had to be kidding. There was no way she would invite Jaxon to dinner. What if he picked up on just how attracted she was to him? That's the last thing she wanted to happen. However, if she didn't invite him, her astute sisters would figure out why. "Fine, I'll call him in a few days to see if he's available. Give me his number." Paige wasted no time in rattling it off.

"And Nadia?"

"Yes, Jill?"

"Please remember Jaxon is a nice guy. Don't do or say anything that will make us regret suggesting you invite him to dinner."

"Well, if he's as nice as the two of you claim, then you won't have anything to worry about. Now, can we change the subject and talk about something else?" she asked.

The conversation about Jaxon stirred up sensations inside of her that she didn't need to be stirred. She was convinced it was merely a phase she was going through. It had to be. At twenty-eight her body was trying to convince her it was past time to end her virginal state. But she refused to do so merely to quench a case of lust. For her sex had to be more meaningful than that. But what if nothing meaningful ever came along? Should she continue to deny herself the experience of making love to man? Especially if it was anything like Jill and Paige claimed it was? Nadia couldn't help but be curious as to whether the real thing was anything compared to her dreams.

"I got a call from Taylor today," Paige said, intruding into Nadia's thoughts.

Taylor Steele Saxon was the sister to Cheyenne, who was married to Quade Westmoreland. "How is she doing?"

"She's doing fine. Quade is giving Cheyenne a surprise birthday party next month and Taylor is helping him with the invitations."

Nadia smiled, thinking about Quade and Cheyenne's triplets. While in high school she had kept the three for a week while their parents had celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary in India. Now the triplets were in their early teens.

“Give me the date so I can mark it on my calendar. Now if you guys don’t mind, I need to finish this report before I can go home.”

After ending the call with her sisters, Nadia glanced at her watch and then looked at the stack of papers on her desk. Standing, she moved to the window. The Dream Makers Acting Academy had once been a spacious house on two hundred acres of land that had been owned by Pam’s high school acting instructor, Louise Shelton. Ms. Shelton, a former actress herself, had been instrumental in getting Pam a scholarship to attend college in California.

When Ms. Shelton died, she willed the house and all the land it sat on to Pam with stipulations. Pam could never sell it and it had to be used as an acting/drama academy. Pam had managed the school until she’d married Dillon, but then had left her friend Cindy in charge. When Cindy’s husband, Todd, who’d been mayor of Gamble for several years, decided to run for state senator, and had won, Todd moved his family to Cheyenne, the state’s capital. That’s when Pam had offered the job to Nadia.

Pam had since opened a second school in Denver. Like this one, it operated at full capacity. A couple of years ago, Pam purchased land for a third drama academy in the DC area. Currently Paige was managing that one.

Returning to her chair, Nadia sat back down. The school had closed an hour ago, but she was still here. Some of the students were rehearsing downstairs, all excited about this year’s holiday production. She refused to think it wouldn’t be happening unless she found a replacement sponsor and fast. The Dunnings Financial Group pulling out was a hiccup of the worst kind.

Starting tomorrow she would begin making calls to several businesses in town. She wasn’t sure how that would work out since most of them had already donated to the school and were contributing to other local charities.

Leaning back in her chair, she wondered where on earth would she get the extra money needed for the school’s holiday play.

* * *

Jaxon Ravel stood at the window in his hotel room and gazed out at downtown Gamble, Wyoming. If anyone had told him two years ago that the decision to expand his family’s technology business would bring him here, he would not have believed them.

The home office for Ravel Technologies was in Virginia, and so far he'd purchased land to expand into Forbes, Texas. Now he was considering, of all places, Gamble. He would admit it was mainly because of a particular woman. At least that had been the case a few days ago when he'd first arrived in town. However, it didn't take him long to discover Gamble was Wyoming's best-kept secret.

Although the town's growth began a few years ago, there were a number of national corporations unaware of the city's potential and attractiveness. That lack of awareness was in his favor. He could purchase all the land he needed at a fair market price before there was a business boom. He was also satisfied knowing there would be adequate housing for his employees who relocated here. There was no doubt in his mind that Gamble would be an ideal place to live, work and raise a family.

As for him personally...it was the perfect place to pursue a certain woman he wanted. Nadia Novak.

Jaxon was a man who could appreciate a beautiful woman whenever he saw one, and Nadia had taken hold of his senses the first time he'd laid eyes on her. That had been a little over a year ago at his cousin Maverick Outlaw's wedding reception. The minute she'd entered the banquet room of the Blazing Frontier Dude Ranch there had been something about her that demanded a second look and then a third. Never in his life had he been so captivated by a woman. He'd asked his cousin Jess about her and when Jess had said Nadia Novak had a rather feisty personality, that had made Jaxon even more interested.

Unlike some men, he preferred a woman with a strong personality mainly because over the years most of those he'd dated had had anything but. They'd assumed in order to capture the interest of the Ravel heir, they had to be mild, meek, the epitome of social decorum, grace and sophistication. That's where they'd been wrong since he found that type of woman boring as hell.

Jaxon wanted a woman who was tough, independent and spirited—like his mother. His father, Arnett Ravel, said the first thing that had attracted him to Ingrid Parkinson was her energy, sassiness and spunk. Those were traits Jaxon's mother still possessed and his father still admired.

His father had also said that a Ravel man would know the woman he was destined to share his life with the moment he saw her. Jaxon had always assumed it would be someone from his home state of Virginia. He hadn't been prepared to be taken with the likes of a Wyoming-born beauty named

Nadia Novak.

Getting Nadia to be as taken with him as much as he was with her would be a challenge, but like he'd told the males in her family, it was one he was up to. Whenever he'd seen her she'd been friendly and pleasant, but she never had much to say. At least not to him. And there were times when he thought she was avoiding him. Jaxon figured the main reason for that was because she hadn't gotten to know him. That assumption was what had led him here.

Never in his thirty-three years had he ever pursued a woman. Because of the Ravel name and wealth, it had always been the other way around. He'd been warned by the Westmorelands and Outlaws that he had his work cut out for him. There were some who even jokingly referred to her as the "Renegade Novak."

He had to be patient and not overplay his hand. For her to get to know him, they needed to spend time together. He'd been in Gamble a little more than a week and as part of his plan, he had deliberately not looked her up. Tomorrow he would drop by the drama academy and invite her to lunch or suggest dinner. It would come across as nothing more than a friendly gesture on his part since they were connected to the same families. He smiled, liking that approach.

He turned away from the window at the sound of his phone. Moving across the room he picked it up off the nightstand, not recognizing the caller's ID. "Yes?"

"Jaxon, this is Nadia Novak."

He pulled in a surprised breath. What were the odds that the very woman he'd been thinking about would call him? "Nadia, how are you? This is a surprise."

He felt sensations in his lower extremities just from hearing the sound of her voice. "What can I do for you?" He asked the question while his mind was filled with several scenarios of all the things they could do for each other.

"I was talking to my sisters earlier this week and they mentioned you were in Gamble."

"Yes, I'm here on business."

"That's what they said, and I'd like to invite you to dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Yes. Tomorrow. In my home at the Novak Homestead. It's the least I can

do since we have close ties to the same families.”

A smile spread across his lips. That had been the same angle he’d planned to use. “I wouldn’t want you to go to any trouble.”

“I won’t. I enjoy cooking and look forward to doing so for someone other than myself for a change.”

“All right, if you’re sure?”

“I’m positive.”

“In that case, I accept. What’s your address?” he asked, reaching for the pen and notepad off the nightstand.

She rattled it off to him and he jotted it down. “Thanks for the invitation. What time do you want me to come?”

“How about five o’clock? Will that work for you?”

Little did she know he would make any time work when it came to her.

“Yes, five o’clock is fine.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow. Goodbye, Jaxon.”

“Goodbye, Nadia.”

Jaxon’s smile widened as he disconnected the call. Of all the luck. Getting that call from Nadia had certainly made his day. He couldn’t wait to see her tomorrow.

Two

What a man, what a mighty good-looking man...

Nadia stood at the kitchen window and watched Jaxon get out of his car. She definitely appreciated what she saw and from where she was standing, she was seeing a lot. This particular window was designed in a way that gave anyone looking through it a good view of approaching visitors without being seen. In other words, you could watch them without them knowing they were being observed. It was a clever idea and she appreciated her great-grandfather Jay Novak for having thought of it.

Jaxon was carrying a huge bouquet of flowers and she figured they were for her. How thoughtful. The women in the Westmoreland and Outlaw families who'd gotten to know him thought he was considerate and kind, a true Southern gentleman who had a strong sense of doing what was right. He'd certainly proved the latter when he'd exposed the wrongdoings of Simon Bordella to the Outlaws.

Nadia placed a hand over her heart when it began beating fast. The closer he got, the more he worked on all of her female senses. There was something about Jaxon Ravel that did things to her each and every time she saw him. What was there about him that made her feel vulnerable? Make her want to toss caution to the wind and...

And do what? Risk giving her heart to another man? Have another man place her on his *agenda*? Trample both her heart and her pride? Refusing to think about what Benson had done to her, she concentrated on studying Jaxon instead. Why did he have to look so good?

He had coffee-colored skin, dark brown eyes and a solid, bearded jaw. She also knew he had black hair under that Stetson he was wearing. He had handsome features on a definitely sensual face, features any woman would drool over. He was also tall with muscular shoulders, a tight abdomen and a broad and powerful-looking chest. Definitely a body that was well-built.

The business jacket he wore over a white, collared shirt fit him perfectly, and she figured his taut thighs were why those slacks looked so darn good on him. Altogether—his looks, clothes and walk—made up a very alluring

package. Now for the umpteenth time she was wondering if she should have her head examined for following Jill's and Paige's advice and inviting him to dinner.

She nearly jumped at the sound of the knock at the door. Drawing in a deep breath, she moved away from the window and left the kitchen. She glanced around the living room and wondered what he would think of her home. Although the Novak Homestead encompassed a lot of acres of land, the two-story, five-bedroom, four-bath house wasn't all that big. At least not in comparison to the monstrosity of a ranch house she'd heard Jaxon owned in Virginia. Paige had visited there a few times with Jess. Dumfries, Virginia, was less than thirty miles from the nation's capital. Paige had told her all about Jaxon's horse ranch and the beautiful thoroughbreds he owned.

Not wanting Jaxon to know she'd been spying on him from the moment his car had pulled into her yard, she asked, "Who is it?"

"Jaxon."

She opened the door. Although she'd seen his approach, every single step of it, she still blinked. Up close he was even more handsome, and when he smiled, making dimples appear, she was a goner. She forced her attention from his face to the two top buttons on his shirt that were undone, exposing a dark, hairy chest. Her heart rate increased. She couldn't help but appreciate his total maleness although she resented her reaction to it.

"Hello, Nadia."

His greeting made her look back into his face. "Jaxon. Welcome to my home," she said, easing back for him to enter while pulling herself together. He smelled good. She thought that same thing each and every time she was around him.

"These are for you," he said, handing her the flowers and then removing his Stetson and placing it on the hat rack by the door.

"Thank you. They are beautiful. You didn't have to," she said, lowering her head to draw in the scent of the flowers. They were a beautiful mixture of pink daisies, white peonies, orchids, bluebells and roses. But what had really gotten her was the feel of his hand when he'd given her the flowers. She had felt the touch all the way to her toes.

She glanced back up at him, smiled. "But I'm glad you did. I love flowers and these are some of my favorites."

"I'm glad."

"Excuse me while I put them in a vase of water. Make yourself at home."

The table is set and dinner is ready.”

“It smells good.”

“Thanks.” She’d asked his Outlaw cousins about his favorite foods. Not surprisingly most were Southern dishes. One year while in high school she’d spent the entire summer with the Atlanta-based Westmorelands. That summer she had worked in Chase Westmoreland’s restaurant and learned how to cook most of the foods Jaxon liked.

It didn’t take her long to find a vase while recalling her reaction when their hands had touched. Just remembering it made her feel light-headed. Why now? She’d been around him before, although for short periods of time. That one time the two of them had engaged in a longer conversation was at Charm’s wedding. She had felt somewhat light-headed then, and had to fight back from drooling.

Now that they were completely alone in her home, more than anything, she needed all the self-discipline she could muster to handle her attraction. The last thing she wanted or needed was for her body to look for some excuse to be drawn closer to him, to desire him any more than she already did. That had been her mistake with Benson. She had been taken with him from the first.

After putting the flowers in water, she headed back to the living room.

* * *

Jaxon turned from studying the huge portrait when he heard the sound of Nadia returning. He watched, appreciating her shapely backside as she crossed the room to place the vase of flowers on a table in front of a window. She then turned to him with a huge smile on her face.

“I think they look perfect here, don’t you?” she asked.

He honestly thought she looked pretty damn perfect in her blue maxi-dress. It had a drawstring that emphasized her small waistline, and she’d complemented it with a short suede vest and a pair of black leather boots.

He’d seen her a few times in a shorter dress and knew she had a gorgeous pair of legs. He especially liked the outfit she was wearing because it showcased all her shapely curves. “Yes, they look nice there,” he said. He then turned back to the huge portrait he’d been looking at earlier. Last thing Nadia needed to see was how aroused he’d gotten from looking at her.

“This is a nice family picture,” he said, trying to concentrate on the huge, framed portrait that hung over her fireplace. It was a picture of an older

couple surrounded by four beautiful younger girls. "You look so young."

He knew the moment she'd come to stand beside him and glanced over at her. For a second, maybe two, their gazes held. That's when he felt it. A sexual connection she was trying to fight the same way he was. Had he misread her all these times? Had this been the reason she'd avoided him?

She quickly broke eye contact with him to glance up at the picture. "I was six. This picture was taken a few months before Pam left for college in California. Although we were all smiling, my, Jill and Paige's hearts were breaking. We didn't want Pam to leave us and go so far away."

He nodded. "The four of you are close?" Although he asked the question, he already knew the answer. Anyone observing the four whenever they were together could see that.

"Yes. Pam is the best oldest sister anyone could have. We have different mothers. Her mother died when Pam was three and Dad married my mother, Alma, on Pam's tenth birthday. Pam says my mom was the best birthday present she'd ever gotten. Mom filled the void she'd had in her life after losing her mother."

He glanced back at the picture. Alma Novak had been a beautiful woman and he could see her catching the eye of the widowed rancher Jay Winston Novak Jr. It was probably the same way her youngest daughter had caught his. "Your mother was a beautiful woman and your father, quite a handsome man. They had a beautiful family," he said, glancing over at her.

"Thank you. If you want to take off your jacket, there's a closet near the door next to the hat rack, Jaxon."

"All right." He removed his jacket and then walked over to the closet to put it in before returning to the living room. He saw that she was staring at him. "Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"No. Nothing is wrong. In fact, dinner is ready," she answered. "I left work early to come home to prepare it."

"You didn't have to go to all that trouble." He said the words, although he was glad she had since this gave him the opportunity to not only see her again but to spend time with her.

She waved off his words. "No trouble since I love to cook. Unfortunately, there isn't anyone here to cook for."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that she could cook for him anytime but he decided to keep that to himself. "Is there a place where I can wash my hands?"

“Yes, just follow me.”

She led the way and he couldn't help how his heart missed a couple of beats while admiring the sexiness of her walk. “Here's the powder room. The kitchen and dining room are through that door.”

“Okay.”

Moments later when he walked through the door that led to the kitchen and dining area, he paused. She was leaning down to take a tray of bread out the oven. He couldn't help appreciating the shape of her backside while she did so.

He cleared his throat to let her know he was there. She glanced over at him while placing the tray on a cooling rack on the counter. “Please have a seat at the dining room table. What would you like to drink?”

“What do you have?”

“A little bit of everything. Thanks to Spencer, I never run out of wine and I make sure I have beer, wine coolers and coffee on hand for whenever those Westmorelands or Outlaws decide to visit.” Spencer Westmoreland and his wife, Chardonnay, owned Russell Vineyards which was located in Napa Valley.

Jaxon tilted his head to look at her. “They do that a lot? Come visiting?”

She grinned as she placed several rolls of bread on a tray. “They do it enough, just to check up on me. Not as much now as they did when I first moved back here. I guess they're now convinced that I can take care of myself.”

He was glad to hear that. When he had arrived on her property and had seen how massive it was and how far away the location was from town, he became concerned with her living here alone. The good thing was all the security cameras installed around her land. “Wine will be fine,” he said.

It was only when she finally sat down at the table that he did so as well. After she'd said grace, she glanced over at him. “I hope you like everything.” She then took the lids off the platters.

He couldn't stop the smile that spread across his lips. All the things she'd uncovered were foods he loved to eat. There was no way this was a coincidence. He was not a person who believed you had to wait for Thanksgiving to feast on turkey and dressing. Then there was a medley of garlic roasted mixed vegetables, potato salad and hot yeast rolls.

“Dig in and make sure you leave room for dessert. I baked a chocolate cake.”

His eyes lifted. “You did?” Chocolate cake was his favorite.

“Yes.”

He looked at the platters again before gazing back at her. “You did all this for me?”

He watched her shrug a pair of feminine shoulders. “Like I said, I enjoy cooking and finding out about the foods you liked was easy.” She chuckled and said, “Chase told me whenever you’re in Atlanta and patronize his restaurant you always get the turkey and dressing off the menu. Jason told me that you do the same thing whenever you’re in Denver and go to McKays restaurant.”

“True. I’d eat turkey and dressing every day of the week if I could.”

“Well, just so you know, I learned how to make the turkey and dressing from Chase, so it ought to be good.”

“I’m sure it will be.” After taking his first bite, he saw that it was. “Nadia, this is delicious.”

He watched her lips ease into a smile. “Thanks.”

Now they were getting somewhere. He could still feel sexual chemistry flowing between them, and he had a feeling she was trying hard to suppress it. He didn’t want it quelled one iota. In fact, knowing she wasn’t immune to him as he’d thought, gave him hope. However, he wanted her to feel relaxed around him, at ease and to lower that guard he felt she’d put up for whatever reason.

They began eating. When he glanced up to look at her, he saw her looking at him. Like they’d done earlier in front of the fireplace, their gazes held for an intense few seconds before she looked back down at her food. Whatever he’d been about to say had been wiped from his mind, so he resumed eating while thinking just how strikingly beautiful she was. So much so that she’d nearly taken his breath away just now.

But then that’s the same reaction he’d gotten the first time he’d seen her at Maverick and Phire’s wedding reception. Even from a distance, the first thing he’d noticed were her eyes. They were chocolate brown and almond shaped. Then there had been her hair, a thick mass of dark brown sister locks that flowed around her shoulders and complemented her honey-brown skin tone.

Jaxon figured the silence between them would continue unless he said something, so he did. “I understand you moved from Gamble when Dillon married Pam.”

She looked over at him. “Yes, that’s right.”

“What made you move back?”

She smiled again and he felt a deep fluttering in the pit of his stomach from that smile. “For the longest I had no intention of returning here. There was even a time when Paige, Jill and I tried convincing Pam to sell, but she wouldn’t. She wanted to hold on to it for our legacy. I’m glad she did. I hadn’t known how much I’d missed the place until we came back one weekend to attend a play at Pam’s acting school. That’s when I realized something.”

“What?”

“That saying ‘there’s no place like home’ was true.”

She took a sip of her wine then added, “Don’t get me wrong, I love Westmoreland Country, too. But I was born here. In this very house, and coming back that time made me realize it means a lot to me.” She paused for a moment. “What about your home in Virginia, Jaxon? I heard it’s beautiful.”

There was no need to ask where she’d heard that from since her sister Paige and his cousin Jess were frequent visitors whenever Jaxon was home. He liked that DC was less than an hour away from his ranch. “Thanks. Like you, I was born on the Circle R Ranch. My parents signed it over to me when they retired and decided to move closer to the city.”

“They were involved with your family’s company, right?”

After taking a sip of his wine, he said, “Yes. My father was CEO of Ravel Technologies, and Mom was CEO of the Ravel Institute of Technology. Now I’m CEO of both. Luckily, I have good people working for me.”

He paused a moment and said, “The Circle R Ranch will always be home for me, although because of all my travels I’m not there as often as I’d like.”

She nodded. “I understand you raise horses, Jaxon. And that you own several prized thoroughbreds. Some of which have competed in the derbies.”

It seemed that she was trying to keep the conversation on him and not her. He intended to remedy that. “Yes, the Circle R started out as a horse ranch with my great-grandfather. It still is and I have a devoted staff whose job is to handle the horses.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Now, enough about me. Tell me about you, Nadia.”

Three

Nadia glanced over at Jaxon again, wishing he hadn't said her name like that and wishing even more that her body didn't react whenever he did. He pronounced it with a Southern drawl that seemed to roll off his lips. Those same lips she enjoyed watching every time his mouth moved. Was there anything about him that she didn't find a total turn-on?

"There's not much to tell," she finally said after forcing herself to stay focused on their conversation. "You already know that I'm Pam, Jillian and Paige's youngest sister. And I'm sure you've heard the story of how we tried to ruin Pam's engagement to this guy name Fletcher."

He chuckled. "Yes, I heard about that."

"Pam thought going through with a loveless marriage was something she had to do to save us from losing this house. It was a blessing that Dillon stopped by when he did. I don't want to think where we'd be if he hadn't."

Jaxon nodded and then took a sip of his wine. She couldn't help looking at his lips again. "There's a lot about this house that reminds me of Dillon's home," he said, after placing his wineglass down. "They are similar in design."

She smiled. "Yes, and there's a reason for it. My great-grandfather Jay Winston Novak Sr. and Dillon's great-grandfather Raphel Westmoreland were once business partners. I'm told that Raphel liked the design of this house so much that years later when he settled in Denver and built his own home, he used this same architectural design."

"Dillon mentioned that the two great-grandfathers had been business partners here in Gamble. What sort of business was it?"

Nadia thought he was doing a good job of keeping the conversation flowing between them. She was glad since it eliminated any awkward moments, and she was beginning to feel comfortable around him. However, that comfort level didn't decrease her attraction to him.

"It was a dairy business. However, from the journals Pam and Dillon discovered in a trunk in the attic, Raphel took care of the horses. I understand he was very good with them. Those Westmoreland cousins in the horse-

training business probably inherited their love of horses from him.”

“Your great-grandfather raised horses?”

“Yes, and he passed his love of them to his son and my father. I’m sure Dad wanted at least one son instead of four daughters but that didn’t stop him from making sure we loved horses, too. He also made sure we knew how to take care of them, and he taught us how to ride.”

She took a sip of her own wine and then added, “I’ve been riding since I was two. Dad was a wonderful trainer and over the years all his girls had received awards for their riding skills.”

“All four of you?”

“Yes. Pam was a pro since she’d been riding longer. Jill wanted to be as good as Pam, and since Dad thought she had potential he sent her to horse-riding school. She competed nationally until Dad got sick. That’s when money was needed to pay for his medicine and care.”

“Did you enjoy living in Denver?”

Evidently, he saw the sadness in her eyes from remembering that time when her father was sick and he had quickly changed the subject. She appreciated him doing so. That hadn’t been easy time for the Novak sisters. Pam, who’d had a bubbling career in Hollywood as an actress, had come home to help take care of their father as well as her three younger sisters.

In a way Nadia knew that’s what made Dillon and Pam the perfect couple. Just like Pam had put her sisters’ needs before her own, Dillon had done the same by raising his siblings and cousins after his parents, uncle and aunt had died in a plane crash.

“Yes, I enjoyed living in Denver. When Dillon married Pam the entire Westmoreland family claimed us as theirs. Pretty much like they’re doing to you now. That’s the Westmoreland way. They are big into family.”

She watched the smile that spread across his lips and fought hard for her body not to respond. “I can see that,” he said. “I had a younger sister who died before her first birthday of a heart defect. I grew up without any cousins and admit the Westmorelands and Outlaws were a bit overwhelming at first. There are so many of them.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your sister.” She touched his arm. “But you seemed to have fit right in with our families.”

“They didn’t give me much of a choice,” he replied, grinning.

She couldn’t help but grin back, knowing exactly what he meant. It had been that way for her and her sisters as well. In no time it was as if they’d

known the Westmorelands all their lives. She'd observed Jaxon with them over the past year and like she'd told him, he seemed to fit right in. They included him in just about everything. She'd heard he'd flown to Denver, Montana and Atlanta a number of times to take part in those infamous Westmoreland poker games.

"I understand you attended Harvard," he said in a voice that felt like warm honey being poured over her skin.

"Yes, I did. However, first I attended the University of Wyoming for my bachelor's degree. Then I went to Harvard for my MBA."

He nodded. "An MBA is impressive, especially one from Harvard. I was in a long line of Ravel men who'd attended MIT and decided not to break tradition. I did, however, go to Harvard Law School."

"Did you practice law?"

"I did for a couple of years as one of the firm's attorneys. However, when my father let it be known he would be retiring in a few years I figured that was my cue to get ready to take over the reins as CEO."

Nadia had googled him and knew all about his family and how they'd acquired their wealth. She'd read how Jaxon's paternal grandfather founded the Ravel Institute of Technology and how it was revered the likes of MIT in providing technological advances in higher learning. There was a waiting list to get master's degrees in technology management from the institute and the majority of the students were all but guaranteed six-figure jobs upon graduating. A good number went to work for Ravel Technologies Incorporated, which was reputed to be one of the most successful technology firms in the nation. At some point, the firm had decided to expand in several parts of the country.

"I understand you're VP of the acting school here," Jaxon said, intruding into her thoughts.

"Yes. My original plan was to move back to Denver after college and go to work at Blue Ridge Land Management," she said, mentioning the billion-dollar corporation owned by the Westmorelands. "However, Pam knew I was interested in moving back to Gamble and when this position came up, she thought I'd be good for it and she offered it to me."

After taking another sip of her wine, she added, "The school depends on donations to award scholarships to deserving students as well as to put on special programs and projects each year. One of my jobs is to make sure we continue to receive funds for all those things."

“Sounds like you’re kept pretty busy.”

“Not too busy. Once in a while it requires some travel, but I like what I do.” That was true. Even now when she needed more funds for the upcoming play and had no idea where they would come from.

They continued conversing through dinner and it was easy to tell that Jaxon was confident with himself but not overly so and definitely not cocky. He had the type of voice that whenever he spoke, she couldn’t help but listen. It was just that captivating. She was glad she was taking this time to get to know him and a part of her wished she would have done so sooner.

The reason she hadn’t done so was her fear of him realizing just how attracted she was to him. Even now she hoped he hadn’t figured it out. The thought that he might have sent panic skidding up her spine. More than once he’d caught her staring at him. Each time, he’d just given her a friendly smile before striking up another conversation.

“I understand you’re looking for land to expand here in Gamble,” she said when they had finished their meal and had pushed their plates aside.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Why Gamble? What made you turn your sights here, Jaxon?”

* * *

Jaxon fought back telling her that *she* was the reason he had set his sights on Gamble. However, if truth be told, once he had visited the town, he’d discovered it was truly a hidden treasure.

Something similar had happened last year. His actual reason for arriving in Forbes, Texas, was to expose Simon Bordella and his betrayal of the Outlaws. His claim about wanting land to expand had been a ruse. But, in the end, just like in Gamble, he’d seen the potential of actually expanding his business in the area.

“The suggestion to expand here actually came from Dillon,” he said. That much was the truth. It had happened the night of the poker tournament, when he’d announced his intentions toward Nadia. “He mentioned he’d thought about expanding Blue Ridge Land Management to Gamble because land was plentiful here and at a reasonable price.”

She nodded. “I recall Dillon changed his mind after deciding Wyoming was too close to Colorado and if he was going to expand it would be best to do so in another part of the country.”

“Yes, and he suggested that I come and check out Gamble. I’ve only been here a little more than a week and so far I’m impressed with what I see. Wyoming is the least populated state in this country. There’s a lot of untouched land here and a lot of ranches. I can see why Wyoming is considered the Cowboy State.”

“Yes, we are known to have our cowboys, which equates to plenty of rodeos,” she said.

That made him wonder. Nadia was a beautiful woman and with so many cowboys around, he could see her catching their attention. Had none caught her eye? A lot of women went for the rugged, bronco, chaps-wearing type. Jess and Maverick claimed they’d never known her to be involved in a serious relationship. The Westmorelands had claimed the same. He couldn’t help wondering why. Had some man broken her heart at some point in time?

Then there was that sexual attraction flowing between them. Sensations seeped through his veins every time he looked at her and every time she looked at him. She had to be feeling it. He now knew for certain that she wasn’t as immune to him as he’d originally assumed. It had taken them being alone for him to hone on to it.

“Are you ready for dessert, Jaxon?”

He recalled she’d made a chocolate cake. Dessert was the end of the meal and the thought of that dampened his spirits. He had enjoyed the time he’d spent here with her talking and getting to know her. Listening to the sound of her voice stirred all sorts of longing within him.

It had taken all his willpower to contain himself as he watched her eat. Damn, he actually envied her fork each time she’d stuck it in her mouth. He could just imagine her tongue twirling around it. Another thing he thought was that he had yet to see the renegade side of Nadia. Was she putting on her best behavior for his benefit? Why? More than anything he wanted her to be herself.

Knowing she was waiting for a response, he said, “I’m ready for dessert. Everything was delicious, Nadia. You’re a wonderful cook. I find it hard to believe there aren’t any hungry cowboys around these parts who would appreciate a home-cooked meal.”

He hoped his comment would open the discussion as to why, at twenty-eight, she wasn’t seriously involved with anyone. He saw the expression on her face change from a smile to a frown and wondered why. Had what he’d said hit a nerve? She stood and tossed him a haughty look. He had a feeling

he was finally about to see the very sassy, outspoken Nadia.

“You’re right, there are quite a few hungry cowboys around here, but trust me when I say that I have no interest in feeding them.”

Whoa... Well, she’d certainly told him. However, he felt there was a deeper meaning in her answer, and he had no problem digging. He leaned back in his chair. “Care to share the reason why?”

Her frown turned to a glare that sharpened on him. “Let’s just say I’m picky when it comes to men.”

“Picky in what way?”

“That’s none of your business.”

He couldn’t help but smile because everything about her was his business. This was the Nadia Novak he’d heard about and the one he’d been waiting to see. “Remind me to never ask you a question.”

“Oh, you can ask all you want, just as long you know that I reserve the right not to answer.”

“Touché. And just for the record, I understand your position because I’m picky as well when it comes to the opposite sex.”

She lifted a brow denoting her curiosity. “Are you?”

“Yes. So, I guess you can say we have something in common.”

He could tell by the stiffening of her shoulders that she didn’t agree with that assessment. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go get those slices of cake.” She then walked out of the dining room toward the kitchen and said over her shoulder, “I’m not sure if we have anything in common or not, Jaxon Ravel.”

He couldn’t help the way his lips twitched into a smile and was glad she hadn’t turned around to see it.

Four

Nadia leaned against the kitchen cabinet, determined to get her anger in check and her desires under control. Dining with Jaxon had been nice, especially with them getting to know each other. But then his question about inviting cowboys to dinner had rubbed her the wrong way because it had reminded her of that incident with Hoyle Adams.

When she'd moved back to Gamble there had been men—namely cowboys—practically coming out of the woodwork, asking her out. It was a full year before she'd decided to go out with Hoyle. She'd played it safe and accepted his invitation to the movies a few times before inviting him to dinner. That had been a mistake. He had assumed she would be the after-dinner delight. After the meal she'd prepared, while she'd been in the kitchen to get the banana pudding she'd baked, he'd slipped out to his truck for his duffel bag. He'd actually assumed he would be staying the night and couldn't believe it when she'd asked him to leave.

That's when he'd acted like a total ass. He even had the nerve to tell her that all the single women in Gamble, and a few married ones as well, wanted him, and that she should be grateful she was the object of his attention. She'd told him just what he could do with all that attention.

He'd left with a bruised ego, but not before accusing her of being frigid just because she'd refused to sleep with him. Newsflash! She didn't do anything just for the hell of it, especially when it concerned her body. As far as Nadia was concerned it was no big deal that at twenty-eight she hadn't yet met a guy she felt was worthy of sleeping with. In fact, she'd never thought of making out with any man...

Until she'd met Jaxon.

Her sisters didn't know that since meeting him, she dreamed about him most nights. In secret he'd become her fantasy man. There was just something about him that pushed all her buttons in ways she hadn't thought was possible. During dinner when he'd licked a dab of gravy from around his mouth with his tongue, she could imagine him using that tongue to lick all over her the same way. She'd never had such thoughts before, but she had

imagined them with Jaxon.

Nadia let out a frustrated sigh. She had to pull herself together. Sitting there talking with him, eating and sipping wine while getting to know him, had made her lower her guard and get too comfortable. But then why did she think she had to be uncomfortable around him? He'd been a perfect gentleman since he'd arrived. It wasn't his fault that bringing up the issue of her feeding a cowboy had pressed the wrong button and set her off. She could just imagine what he thought of her now. Probably Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde.

Knowing she had hung out in the kitchen long enough, she drew in another deep breath and grabbed both plates of cake to walk back to the dining room. He looked up when she entered and stood. "Need help with those?" he asked.

"No, I got this," she said, setting plates with slices of cake on the table and then sliding one across to him.

He didn't sit back down until she did and she couldn't help but admire his manners. The Westmorelands and Outlaws behaved the same way. They might get rowdy at times but they respected women. She knew that some men didn't bother with all that chivalry stuff anymore because they assumed most women preferred they didn't. She wasn't one of them. Her father had raised his daughters to expect men to treat them like ladies.

"You think I can eat this huge slice?" he asked, picking up his fork while eyeing the cake she'd placed in front of him.

It didn't seem like her earlier flippant remarks had bothered him and she was glad they hadn't. "Yes, I think you can handle it," she said, wishing her gaze wasn't drawn to the hand that had picked up his fork. Why on earth would she think he had sexy fingers?

When he smiled over at her, flutters invaded her stomach. "Maybe, but I'll be hitting the hotel's fitness room in the morning," he teased.

She watched as he sliced into the cake with his fork and then slid a bite into his mouth. Seeing the way his lips parted sent an intense throbbing between her legs. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before. Not with Benson or Hoyle and she'd seen both men eat. In fact, the way Hoyle had chomped on his food had been annoying.

"This is delicious, Nadia." He took another bite before glancing over at her with bunched brows. "Aren't you going to eat any?" He was probably wondering why she was sitting there staring at him. Specifically, his mouth. Instead of answering, she nodded and reached out to pick up her fork.

"Don't bother. I got this," he said, leaning across the table to bring his fork

with a bite of cake on it to her mouth.

She met his gaze. Did he not know how intimate such a thing was? It was his fork, the same one he'd used. He continued to hold the cake close to her mouth while she studied the look in his eyes, thinking there was something in the dark depths staring back at her. She didn't want to consider the possibility of that being true. Her attraction to him was one thing. The thought the attraction might be reciprocated was something she wasn't sure she could handle.

She could tell him thanks but no thanks, that she could very well slice into her cake and use her own fork. But there was something about the way he was staring at her and the patient way that cake was being held close to her lips. Sensations rushed through her at the thought of them sharing the same fork.

Without saying a word, she parted her lips and he fed her the cake.

* * *

The moment Nadia parted her lips Jaxon knew he'd made a mistake.

Or, maybe not if her soft moan was anything to go by. He had a feeling the sound wasn't because her taste buds were exploding from the sensational flavor of the cake. Instead, he chose to believe it had everything to do with another type of sensation entirely. One he could feel himself. All the way down to his gut. And when her tongue darted out to grab a crumb left on the fork, he nearly lost it.

"You like it?" he asked her in a voice that sounded way too throaty for his own ears.

Still holding his gaze, she nodded and said, "Of course I like it. I baked it, didn't I?"

He couldn't help but smile at the bit of defiance in her voice. "Yes, you baked it."

She then asked him in a somewhat mellow tone, "You liked it?"

He was trying like hell to concentrate on what she was saying and not how turned on he was getting each and every time her lips moved. "Yes. I told you it was delicious. Didn't I?"

Then, as if she accepted his comeback as her due, she nodded and said, "Yes, you did. Thanks for letting me sample yours, but I can eat my own. I can also feed myself."

“I know you can, but I enjoyed feeding you.”

“Why?”

She would have to ask. “I like the thought of us sharing the same fork.”

The surprised look on her face was priceless. It started at her eyes and then spread to her cheeks. Although his response had been honest, maybe he should not have been so bold. His only excuse was that at that moment...or any moment he was around her... Nadia had an impact not only on his male senses, but on his mind.

“Why?”

She was certainly asking a lot of questions. As far as he was concerned, he had no problem telling her whatever she wanted to know. He didn't like playing games anyway. “For me, doing so was a form of intimacy. I wanted to know how you tasted and I wanted you to know the same about me.”

Before her mouth could form the word *why*, he quickly added, “I'm sure by now you've figured out that I'm interested in you.” He wouldn't go so far as to admit to falling in love with her. She wouldn't believe him. However, he had no problem to at least admitting to being attracted to her. He had a strong feeling the attraction was mutual.

He saw a defiant look appear in the depths of her eyes before she placed her fork down. The gaze staring at him was sharp, like it might rip him to shreds at any moment. “You're interested in me for what reason, Jaxon?”

He figured any other man would clam up under her piercing gaze. Instead, he was trying like hell to ignore a multitude of sensations escalating through him. Did she not feel the heat flowing between them? It was heat he welcomed, but he had a feeling she was fighting hard to control her reaction.

“For the reason any man would be interested in a woman, Nadia,” he said, then took a sip of wine.

Something flashed in her eyes. Was he mistaken or was it disappointment? If so, why? Granted, a number of people were never prepared for his outright honesty. He would have thought, however, that she would be. She didn't come across as a woman who preferred a man spouting bullshit.

She sat up straight in her chair and her gaze sharpened even more. “If that's your way of letting me know your interest in me is nothing more than sex, then let me set you straight. That's not how I roll, and I'm disappointed you think that I do.” And then as if that ended the conversation, she picked up her fork and began eating her cake.

“Sex?” he asked, surprised. “What makes you think that's my only interest

in you?”

“What other interest would there be? You did mention the word *intimate* earlier. And what’s more intimate than sex?” she asked. “Just so you know, the last man I invited to dinner who assumed it was all about sex was asked to leave. Should I show you to the door as well?”

She had it all wrong. Damn did she have it all wrong. He wouldn’t say he didn’t think about making love to her, because he did. A lot. Every night. But to him making love to her was synonymous with the love he felt for her.

“You misunderstood me, Nadia. And you definitely misunderstood my intentions.”

“Did I?”

“Yes,” he said, placing down his wineglass.

“Then what did I misunderstand? What are your intentions?”

Jaxon hadn’t wanted to tell her so soon. At least not before spending more time with her, before courting her properly. However, she left him no choice. It was either tell her what she needed to know or let her group him in the same class as the other assholes who hadn’t left a positive impression on her.

To make sure she fully understood what he was about to say, he leaned slightly toward her. Holding tight to her gaze, he said, “My intention, Nadia Novak, is to marry you.”

Five

Nadia tilted her head and stared at Jaxon. He didn't look as if he was teasing. That could only mean... Sliding back her chair, she walked around the table and placed the back of her hand to his forehead.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I figure you must have a high temperature for you to be so delusional."

"I'm in my right mind, Nadia."

Removing her hand, she returned to her chair. "There's no way you can be to say something as asinine as that, Jaxon. Think about it. There's no way you can want to marry me. You don't even know me."

"I would like to get to know you."

She didn't say anything for a moment. "Who put you up to this? Sloan or Maverick?"

She watched as a dumbfounded look appeared on his face. "What makes you think they put me up to anything?"

"Mainly because the three of us are known to play tricks on each other. I figured they owed me for that time I set them up with blind dates from hell a couple of years back."

"Trust me, Sloan nor Maverick have nothing to do with my decision to marry you."

His decision to marry her? Honestly, she didn't believe for one minute he was serious. And even if he was delusional to think such a thing, what man told a woman they barely knew of his plans to marry her? As if it was a done deal and she didn't have anything to say about it?

She wasn't born yesterday and knew she wasn't his type. It wasn't just the fact he was wealthy, since the Westmorelands and Outlaws had plenty of money as well. She would think a man like Jaxon preferred a sophisticated type, a cultured and graceful woman. A woman totally opposite from her. That one time she'd looked him up on the Internet she'd seen images of him from the society pages of several newspapers. In all of them, his date looked the part of a high-class, refined goddess.

"First of all, Jaxon, you won't be marrying me so stop saying such

nonsense. And if Sloan nor Maverick put you up to this foolishness then who did?"

"No one put me up to anything. I'm speaking the truth."

She rolled her eyes. "Get serious."

"I am serious, trust me."

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "No, you aren't if you think for one minute that one day you'll be my husband."

"Don't you plan to marry?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Possibly."

"Then what's the problem?"

She couldn't help but glare across the table at him. "The problem is you. How dare you say something like that, like you have the ability to speak such a thing into existence regardless of how I might feel about it happening. Marriage isn't and never will be at the top of my to-do list. Unlike some women, I don't worry about a biological clock ticking."

There was no way he didn't hear the irritation and strong conviction in her voice because she meant every word. "So, just in case you fell and hit your head on the way over here and are serious about thinking of marrying me, let me go on record to say that it won't be happening." She frowned when he had the audacity to smile.

"We shall see, Nadia."

We shall see? Had he actually said that? In that case, now was the time to show him the door. Easing from her chair, Nadia said, "I think you should leave now, Jaxon."

He glanced down at his cake. "I haven't finished eating."

"Then I suggest you take it with you."

He stared at her for a minute and then said, "I'm sorry if what I said upset you. However, it's my belief that honesty is the best policy."

Nadia stared at him and then she eased back down in her chair, totally confused. Although she hadn't gotten to know Jaxon as well as the others in her family had, at no time had she assumed he wasn't operating with a full deck. Until now. Therefore, she decided to use another approach.

"When did you decide you wanted to marry me?"

"The moment we were introduced."

Now she'd heard everything. "You honestly want me to believe that?" she asked, chuckling, finding what he'd said totally absurd.

"I don't see why not when it's the truth, Nadia."

Nadia would admit to feeling something when they'd first been introduced as well. However, she would call it what it was. Lust of the worst kind. She then thought about what he'd said. If he'd been taken with her from the first, why hadn't he approached her before now? The only reason he was here was because she had called and invited him to dinner. He'd even admitted he'd been in town a while, yet he hadn't looked her up. So how was she supposed to believe he was interested in her to the point of intending to marry her? That made this entire thing even more outrageous.

"That was truly delicious."

She blinked and glanced down at his plate. It was clean. He had eaten all of his cake. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I've enjoyed everything about this evening with you, Nadia."

She drew in a deep breath, refusing to get baited. Standing, she said, "I had a rather interesting and enjoyable evening with you. Now it's time to call it a night."

"When can I see you again?"

She shrugged. "Not sure that's a good idea."

"Why? Because I told you of my future plans for us?"

He was frustrating her to the point where she wanted to stomp her feet. "There are no future plans for us, Jaxon. I am absolutely sure of that."

"If you're so certain of it then there should be no reason for me not to see you again, right? Dinner will be on me the next time. You pick the place." He then he stood as well. "I know it's a workday tomorrow for the both of us. I'll be seeing more land."

"So you are in town for that purpose?"

He smiled over at her. "That's one of them, yes."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, while I'm here I hope to get to know you better." Then he changed the subject by saying, "I'll help you clear off the table."

"That's not necessary."

"It is for me. I'll even roll up my sleeves and wash the dishes if you need help."

"I don't. And you don't have to help clear off the table."

"You sure?"

"I'm positive." What she needed was for him to leave. Now. She couldn't think straight with him around. And she desperately needed to think. Do an instant replay and a total reevaluation of everything he'd said, especially the

part about his future plans for them.

“Okay, if you’re certain, Nadia.”

“I am.”

“Then please come walk me to the door.”

She should have declined his request. After all, he knew the way there without her assistance. But then she decided to extend the same courtesy to him she would have expected of him had she been his guest for dinner. Besides, she didn’t want him to think he’d rattled her with his nonsense, even if he had.

“You didn’t say if you’ll have dinner with me,” he said.

They had walked side by side from the dining room and had reached the front door. He opened the closet to get his jacket. She was so focused on him sliding the jacket over his broad shoulders that she almost missed what he’d said. “I’ll think about it.” Although she’d said she would, she honestly knew she wouldn’t. Right now, she needed him gone.

“All right. And like I said, I want you to pick the place.”

Although she hadn’t agreed to anything, she asked, “When?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m free whenever you are.” He was standing there in front of her. She was about to take a step back when he reached out and placed both hands at her waist. The moment he touched her, heat spread to all parts of her body.

He was going to kiss her. She didn’t say anything as she absorbed that fact into her brain. Regardless of the craziness he’d said about marrying her, what he’d said earlier was something she couldn’t deny. She *had* wanted to know how he’d tasted and licking that fork hadn’t been enough. Even with the sweetness of the chocolate cake, a part of her wanted to believe she had also gotten a taste of him. And it was a taste she wanted to experience again.

“Nadia?”

“Yes?”

“I hope you don’t lose much sleep over what I said tonight.”

She lifted her chin. “I don’t plan on losing any sleep when I know it won’t be happening.”

“We’ll see.”

“No, you’ll see,” she said in an annoyed tone.

They stood there, staring at each other, squaring off. She wished all those sensations she’d felt all through dinner weren’t still there. Jaxon was taking her breath away without even trying. If that wasn’t bad enough, the nipples

pressed against the material of her dress suddenly seemed achy. That was a first for her as well.

“It’s getting late,” she said, trying to dismiss the desire for him that was hitting her full force. It couldn’t be helped, with the way his dark eyes were latched on to hers as if daring her to look away. For some reason, she couldn’t. She felt herself falling victim to everything about him. Never had she been so mesmerized with any man, and she couldn’t understand why she was this way with him. And then there was his mouth. The shape of it from corner to corner and that little dip in the middle fascinated her. She didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know that she was out of her element with Jaxon. The man was definitely out of her league. Yet...

“Then I guess I need to say good night.”

His words cut into her trance. Before she could offer a response of *Yes, you do*, he leaned forward, drew her closer and captured her mouth in his.

* * *

Her lips immediately parted under his. The moment their mouths touched, thoughts fled from her mind. She’d needed this to happen. Was glad it was happening. For the past year, she’d wondered about his mouth. Fantasized about it. Dreamed about it. Not only how it would taste but also how well he could use it for kissing.

Now she was finding out and had no complaints. He’d stuck his tongue inside her mouth at the exact moment she released a sigh of pleasure. There was something about the way he was kissing her that sent jolts of heat through her. Never had she been kissed this way, with such mastery and finesse. So vibrantly and with so much passion. It was both mind-blowing and torturous.

He was devouring her mouth with one stroke of his tongue while slowly mating with it with another stroke. It was as if he was methodically and intentionally creating an avalanche of need and pleasure within her. Unable to help herself, she wrapped her arms around his neck to hold, certain if he stopped kissing her, she would melt in a puddle at his feet. Needs she didn’t know she had, and a degree of pleasure she hadn’t known could be derived from a kiss, were taking over her senses.

Without warning, he deepened the kiss and drew her even closer. That’s when she felt him. His aroused body hard against the junction of her thighs.

Knowing he wanted her as much as she wanted him had temptation running rampant through her. Temptation to try some of those things with him that she'd dreamed about. Fantasized about doing.

Suddenly he broke off the kiss, but she soon discovered that he wasn't through with her yet when he traced the tip of his tongue across her lips, corner to corner. Then he stopped and slowly eased back, although he hadn't removed his hands from around her waist.

"I have to fly out tomorrow to Forbes to check on a few things but will return in a day or so. I will be thinking of you, Nadia and I hope you'll be thinking about me."

Before she could respond, mainly to tell him that she wouldn't be thinking about him, he grabbed his Stetson off the hat rack, opened the door and left.

* * *

Jaxon had driven a mile from the Novak Homestead when he pulled his car to the shoulder of the road to inhale and exhale. Never had kissing a woman left him so weak. He'd only stopped kissing her when breathing had become a necessity. Then it had taken all his strength to finally release her and walk out the door.

He rubbed his hand down his face. It had not been his intent to tell her he planned to marry her, and, as expected, he'd put her on the defensive. She would probably avoid going out with him for that reason. He could see her putting roadblocks in his paths.

But Jaxon could never forget the look on her face when he'd broken off the kiss. She hadn't been happy about how she was feeling, if the look on her face was anything to go by. And yet, she had enjoyed it as much as he had. He was certain of it. He'd also felt the way the hardened nipples of her breasts poked into his chest. That was a sure sign of arousal.

His plan was to tear down any wall she tried erecting between them, one brick at a time. Although more than anything he would love to be married to her by New Year's, he knew that some things just couldn't be rushed. He loved her and he had to be patient for her to fall in love with him. He had to believe that eventually she would.

He would give her a few days to think about tonight, just like he would. Then he would call and follow up on his invitation to dinner. No matter what she might be thinking now, there would definitely be a next time for them.

He would see to it.

Six

“**Y**ou can close your mouth now, Rissa,” Nadia said the next morning to the woman sitting across from her desk. Marissa Phelps had been Nadia’s best friend since second grade. When Pam had moved her sisters with her to Denver, Nadia and Rissa had stayed in touch by engaging in summer visits, occasional sleepovers and then attending the same university after high school. It was at the University of Wyoming where Rissa had met Shayne, the man she married. The couple had three beautiful children under the age of ten.

Rissa closed her mouth but leaned forward in her chair with her eyes still widened. “Jaxon Ravel actually told you that he intends to marry you?”

“Yes, that’s what he said. Can you imagine anything so downright ridiculous?”

“I guess you can,” Rissa said, eyeing her speculatively.

“Of course I can. What man tells a woman something like that?”

Rissa shrugged her shoulders as she sat back in her chair. “A man who knows the woman he wants and intends to get her. A man who wants more than a bed partner. He wants a future with the woman he loves. A man who —”

“Love has nothing to do with it,” Nadia interrupted, frowning. “Jaxon doesn’t even know me.” Rissa’s words had put her on the defensive. “You can’t love someone you don’t know.”

Rissa scoffed at that. “I heard it happens that way at times. Otherwise, there would not be any of those love-at-first-sight situations.”

Nadia shook her head. She didn’t believe in that kind of phenomenon either. “Get real, Rissa. Jaxon Ravel doesn’t love me. Besides, I’m definitely not his type. He’s a man who’d prefer a woman with a high degree of sophistication. One who possesses style, grace and pedigree. Not someone who for years was a tomboy. Even now I only act prim and proper when there’s a need. I have no problem being outspoken and opinionated. Being known as a rebel and renegade doesn’t bother me one bit.”

“Maybe he likes you the way you are.”

“Let me say this again, Rissa. Jaxon doesn’t know the way I am because he doesn’t know me. Besides, I’m not sure I even like him.”

Rissa smiled. “If you recall, I didn’t like Shayne at first either. However, he eventually grew on me. But then, maybe not liking Jaxon right off the bat is a good thing. You were smitten with Benson the minute he got in your face at that football game, and you see what happened with that.”

She wished Rissa didn’t make her remember that day or the guy. Yes, she might have been smitten with Benson the first time he’d turned those dreamy hazel eyes on her, but it was only after he’d taken her on a couple of movie dates that she had convinced herself he was a supernice guy. That’s when she had fallen in love with him. Supernice her ass. He had proven just what a scum he was.

“Well, I don’t want Jaxon, or any man for that matter, to grow on me nor do I want to grow on him. I’m not in the mood.”

“Obviously you were in the mood for that whopper of a kiss he laid on you last night,” Rissa said, grinning.

There were days Nadia regretted that Rissa kept her in check. Unlike her sisters, who hadn’t a clue about her attraction to Jaxon, Rissa knew everything. She’d even told Rissa about the kiss that still had her swooning. When Paige and Jill had called that morning to see how dinner with Jaxon had gone, Nadia had told them everything had gone well. What she hadn’t told them was what he’d said about marrying her. Nor had she told her sisters about their heated kiss.

“That kiss took me by surprise. I hadn’t been kissed in a long time, so my mouth was more than ready for some action.”

Rissa chuckled. “I guess it helped that the action was delivered by the same man you’ve been dreaming about for over a year. Don’t you want to compare the dream with the real thing? You can’t even say it’s been a long time since you’ve slept with a man because you’ve never slept with one. I’ve told you more than once what you’re missing.”

Yes, Rissa had. Too many times. To the point where Nadia had gotten curious, too curious for her own good. It didn’t help when Jill and Paige would go on and on about how much they enjoyed their husbands in the bedroom. That was one of the reasons Hoyle had been such a disappointment. She had figured although she hadn’t been looking for anything long-term with him, that maybe after they’d gotten to know each other better, a little roll between the sheets wouldn’t be so bad. It would have rid her of her virginity

and appeased her curiosity. Like with Benson, she was glad she'd discovered just what an ass he was before sharing her body with him.

"Are you going to tell your family what Jaxon said about his plans to marry you?" Rissa asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"Heck no. They like Jaxon. If anything, they would pity him for even contemplating such a thing and warn him off." She paused and then said, "Benson taught me a hard lesson. When I do marry...if that day ever comes...I will marry for love. I will know beyond a shadow of doubt that the man I marry loves me. Truly loves me. I won't take a chance with my heart again."

"Does that mean you won't sleep with a guy until you marry him?"

"No, I didn't say I had to love whatever guy who will become my first. To be quite honest, he doesn't even have to love me. However, I need to feel that I truly do know him and there won't be any surprises later on that I couldn't handle."

"So, what are you planning to do, Nadia? You might want to come up with a plan because I have a feeling Jaxon Ravel has one of his own. Sounds like he intends to wear down your resistance like Shayne did to me. And if that kiss is anything to go by, he's already begun his attack."

The last thing Nadia wanted to think about was that the kiss had been part of a planned attack by Jaxon. In fact, she didn't want to talk about him at all anymore. That meant it was time to send Rissa on her way; otherwise he would remain the topic of their conversation.

Looking at her watch, she said, "Shouldn't you be leaving for work?"

Rissa was the assistant manager of a bank that was a half a mile up the road. Since the bank didn't open until ten, it was Rissa's normal routine after dropping her kids off at school to stop by Dream Makers Acting Academy every weekday morning to share a cup of coffee and girl-talk with Nadia.

Rissa gave Nadia a knowing eye, fully aware of why she'd asked. "Not yet." After taking another sip of her coffee, Rissa inquired, "Has anyone signed on as a sponsor of this year's Christmas play yet?"

Nadia released a frustrated breath. She honestly didn't want to talk about that either. "No. Although I can go to the Westmoreland Foundation as a last resort, I prefer not doing so since they bailed this place out a couple of times before I began working here. The reason Pam hired me is because she believed I could keep sponsorships intact. I can't disappoint her."

"It's not your fault that the Dunnings Financial Group went bankrupt."

"I know, but I should have had a Plan B in place."

“I disagree. Dunnings has always been one of the most prominent employers in the city. A company that could be depended on to fund community projects. It’s unfortunate they had to close their doors when they did. Just think of the number of people who lost their jobs. People who were making good salaries.” Rissa took a sip of her coffee then added, “At least I can admire them for giving everyone a nice severance package with enough funds to last them for the next six months. Everyone is hoping that by then another huge employer will come to town.”

Nadia hoped so, too. Rissa was right. Dunnings was one of the few corporations in Gamble to pay top salaries and who readily funded community projects. They had been sponsoring the Christmas play for years. No one had asked who the new sponsor would be. She figured most people thought she had one.

“Just so you know, Nadia, the mayor and Gamble’s Better Business Bureau had a meeting yesterday. Jaxon Ravel’s name came up. They know he’s in town looking for land to expand his business. They’re hoping he likes the area. Ravel Technologies is three times the size of what Dunnings was.”

“Although Jaxon is looking for land here, there’s no guarantee he’ll buy any,” Nadia interjected.

“I know, but we can all hope,” Rissa said standing. “It will certainly solve the unemployment crisis Gamble will be facing within a few months.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s time for me to skedaddle. I’ll see you again this time tomorrow.”

After Rissa left, Nadia leaned back in her chair and for the umpteenth time replayed in her mind everything that had transpired last night between her and Jaxon. He’d been the perfect gentleman the entire time. She’d been so busy fighting her attraction to him that she hadn’t noticed he’d been attracted to her.

Until he’d fed her that cake.

She had noticed him staring at her a number of times but assumed he’d done so because he had caught her staring at him. It now appeared they had been staring at each other. She figured the reason she hadn’t picked up on an attraction on his end was because he hadn’t been giving her any predatory, I-want-to-take-you-to-bed looks.

What had rocked her world more than anything had been that kiss. What she’d told Rissa was true. She hadn’t been prepared for it. She doubted any woman would have been. What man kissed like that? The way he had taken

her mouth, locked his tongue around hers while he greedily mated with it had sent sparks escalating through every part of her body.

And talking about a body... While he'd held her tight in his arms, with her body pressed hard against his, she had felt him. Namely his arousal. Just knowing the intensity of his desire had matched hers sent a wave passion rushing through her. She was convinced if he hadn't stopped kissing her when he had, she would have gotten her first orgasm ever, right there in his arms. His kiss had been hotter than any she'd ever shared with a man before. Just thinking about it sent sensuous chills through her. That was the last thing she wanted or needed.

* * *

A couple of hours later Nadia was working through the stack of papers her administrative assistant, China Evans, had placed on her desk earlier. She glanced up at the knock on her door. "Come in."

China walked in carrying a huge vase of flowers. Nadia grimaced and sat up in her chair, having an idea who'd sent them. But that didn't make sense when Jaxon had brought her flowers yesterday when he'd arrived for dinner. Why would he be giving her more flowers today? But if they weren't from him, then who else would have sent them?

"These are for you, Ms. Novak." The younger woman of nineteen, who was attending the local community college, smiled from ear to ear as she placed the a dozen red roses on the desk.

"Thank you, China," Nadia said, not bothering to pull off the card that was attached.

"You're not eager to see who they're from?" China asked. "I've never known you to get flowers when it wasn't your birthday or Valentine's Day."

That was true. She always got flowers from various people on her birthday, and Dillon had always sent his Denver Westmoreland female cousins—Megan, Gemma and Bailey—flowers on Valentine's Day. After marrying Pam he'd added Nadia, Paige and Jill to his list. He was such a thoughtful brother-in-law. The best.

"I'll read the card later," Nadia said, turning her attention back to the stack of papers on her desk.

"I guess that means you know who sent them."

"Maybe," Nadia said and that was all she would say on the matter. China

was at that impressionable age where she believed in love. The forever kind. Nadia remembered when she had been that way as well. Her parents, as well as Dillon and Pam, had been great role models. Then Benson had broken her heart and from that day forward she'd shied away from falling in love.

Seeing she was not getting any information out of Nadia, China said, "Well, I guess I'll get back to my desk."

As soon as China closed the door behind her, Nadia pulled the card off the arrangement and read it.

Thinking about you,
Jaxon

Nadia placed the card back in the envelope and slid it into her desk drawer. If Rissa was right and Jaxon was trying to wear down her resistance, first by feeding her cake, then the kiss and now with more beautiful flowers, she had her work cut out for her. She had to make sure he knew a marriage between them wouldn't be happening.

She sighed deeply as she stared at the beautiful red roses. Of course she would thank him for the flowers. However, she would text him instead of calling him, not sure she could handle hearing his voice. And as far as his dinner invitation, she might as well decline that, too, while she was at it. Hopefully, in due time he would discover she would not participate in whatever games he wanted to play.

* * *

Jaxon drove to the airport, glad to finally be leaving Forbes. The trip had taken a day longer than planned due to a glitch in the data system of one of the firm's top clients. He was glad the malfunction had been corrected and now he was on his way back to Gamble.

He wished he could say he'd been too busy to think about Nadia, but that had not been the case. He had thought about her a lot. Each time her face entered his thoughts, he felt emotions so profound that more than once he had to pause to pull himself together and refocus.

If there had been any doubt in his mind that Nadia was the One, it had been dispelled on the night they'd shared dinner together. Specifically, the moment she'd opened the door. Never before had a woman caused his entire body to burn. Up close she'd been even more beautiful and by the end of the evening

she'd had him tied in knots in the most sensual way. Any other man would think such an intense attraction to a woman wasn't normal. However, to him it was. He'd figured it would be that way when he'd found his soulmate, the woman destined to have a special place in his life.

Jaxon was well aware she had issues with accepting that place. Quite frankly, she didn't believe that place existed. The text messages he'd received from her before leaving Forbes pretty much confirmed it. One had thanked him for the roses and the other had turned down his invitation to dinner. She had then proceeded to tell him that she hoped he enjoyed the rest of his stay in Gamble.

If Nadia thought that was the end of them, she was mistaken. There was nothing stopping him from figuring out a different approach.

His thoughts shifted to the call he'd gotten from his administrative assistant advising him of Gamble's mayor's request to meet with him. A meeting had been scheduled for next week but he would have preferred scheduling time with Nadia instead.

He'd dismissed their sexual chemistry as one-sided until she had stood beside him while they'd discussed the huge family picture over her fireplace. That's when he'd felt it, not only the vibes coming from him but from her as well. And the chemistry had been there each and every time their gazes met during dinner. He'd known every time she'd looked over at him because it had resulted in him looking at her.

It didn't take him long for him to realize the reason she hadn't picked up on all those sexual vibes coming from him was because she'd been too busy trying to ignore those coming from her. That's when he'd decided to feed her the cake. Doing so had certainly turned up the heat, which was the very thing he'd wanted to happen. It had been the very thing that had prompted her to remove her blinders.

What he'd thought about most over the last three days had been the kiss they'd shared. It had been everything he'd thought it would be and more. Although it had been intense and invigorating, it hadn't been enough.

A few hours later he was back in his hotel room in Gamble. It was close to seven and he hadn't responded to the two text messages Nadia had sent him. Now he would.

Instead of texting her back he decided to call her. Picking up his cell phone he punched in her number. The phone rang several times and for a minute he thought perhaps she would not answer once she saw the call was from him.

He was about to disconnect when she clicked on.

“Hello.”

He pulled in a deep breath the moment he heard her voice. “Nadia, I got your messages. I’m glad you liked the roses.”

She paused before saying, “They are beautiful. Thank you again.”

“You are welcome. As for my dinner invitation, I’m sorry you’ve decided not to go out with me. I regret that what I said the other night scared you off.”

She hesitated and then said, “Nothing about what you said scared me.”

He couldn’t help but smile at her strong denial. “Didn’t it?”

“No. There was no reason it should when it’s apparent you’re living in a delusional world.”

Undaunted by her words, he said, “That’s your opinion. We could meet and discuss it further if you weren’t so afraid to face the truth.”

“Truth? There’s no truth in what you’re thinking, Jaxon. I don’t like overconfident men.”

That’s what he’d been told. “You’re getting a self-assured man confused with an overconfident one. I know what I want, and I want you. I’ve been up front with you. I don’t like playing games with a woman any more than I like a woman playing games with me.”

He could just imagine her glaring him down through her phone. “Anyway, you’ve made your decision. Have a nice night, Nadia.”

“Wait!”

He took his time answering. “Yes?”

“I’ll have dinner with you, and you’ll see how unafraid I am of you. And you can decide on the place.”

“Fine. I will do that and call you in a few days with the details. Goodbye, Nadia.”

“Goodbye.”

He couldn’t help but smile when she ended the call.

Seven

Nadia stood in the same spot she had last week when she'd watched Jaxon arrive. Unlike then, when she hadn't known what to expect, she knew now. He was a nice guy although a delusional one. There was no other way for her to describe a man who'd told her, without as much as blinking an eye, that he intended to marry her. Regardless of the fact that other than the surface stuff, they knew nothing about each other. Then there was the reality that they weren't in love. In fact, the verdict was still out as to whether she would even consider them friends.

She'd heard from Rissa that he had met with the mayor yesterday. No one knew how that meeting went, although she had more than a hunch what was discussed. Nadia had no idea how much of an expansion Jaxon was contemplating and wondered would it be enough to help the job employment crisis the city would soon be facing. More than likely, Ravel Technologies would be relocating a lot of their present employees and might not need additional staff. At least not to the magnitude the city was hoping for.

Thinking it was best to move away from the window, she did so. There was no need for her adrenaline to get revved up when he got out of the car. She would have more time to fully check him out later and hoped she could contain herself when she did so.

She quickly left the kitchen and moved to the living room with no intention of giving him the chance to knock. Grabbing her purse and shawl, she opened the door and stepped out on the porch, locking the door behind her. He had called a few days ago saying dinner plans had been finalized. When she'd asked where and suggested she just meet him there, seeing no reason for him to drive to her house to pick her up, he refused to do that, saying his definition of a date was the guy picking up the woman from her home and returning her there. He never did say where they were going.

She studied him as he got out of the car. He was talking on his cell phone and hadn't looked up to see her. Since he'd told her to dress casually, she'd opted for a skirt and blouse. It was her first time wearing the ensemble that she'd purchased earlier that year while shopping with her sisters in New

York. Her sisters thought she looked good in them.

From the expression that appeared on Jaxon's face when he put his phone in his jacket pocket and glanced up and saw her, he agreed with her sisters. She thought he looked good, too, dressed in a pair of dark slacks, a tweed jacket and that black Stetson on his head.

He had stopped walking and stood there in a masculine stance that caused her heart rate to increase. The sun was going down behind him and the backdrop—orange and gold over the mountains—was a breathtaking sight that complemented a breathtaking-looking man. Seeing it before her eyes stirred something deep within her and she just couldn't understand it. She'd been raised around eye candy, ultrahandsome men, mainly the Westmorelands, and then there were the Outlaws. She would even say she'd met a few cowboys in town she thought were good on the eyes. But at that moment, the memory of any other man faded to black. Jaxon Ravel was in a class all by himself. His lips curved into that killer smile that showed all his dimples as he began walking again.

Nadia drew in slow, steady breaths and wished Jaxon's smile didn't affect her the way it did. Having a handsome man stare at you with male appreciation in his eyes was one thing. Throw a sexy smile in the mix and it was lethal. "Hello, Jaxon."

"Nadia. You look nice."

"Thanks. I hope what I'm wearing is appropriate for where we're going."

"It is. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

She wished he hadn't reached for her hand, leaving her no choice but to give it to him. The moment he touched it, goose bumps appeared on her skin. Suddenly, images floated through her mind, namely that of his arms wrapped tight around her as she'd kissed him as deeply and thoroughly as he'd kissed her.

He walked her to his car and opened the door. Releasing his hand, she slid onto the leather seat. She hadn't missed how his gaze had lowered to her legs when the hem of her skirt had inched up a little. "Is anything wrong, Jaxon?" she asked, after making sure her seat belt was securely fastened.

He moved his gaze to her face and his lips curved into a smile. One that sent flutters through her stomach. "No, nothing is wrong."

A short while later they had driven past downtown, where most of the popular restaurants were located. She glanced over at him, and evidently

anticipating her question, he said, “Where we’re going is a surprise.”

“And what if I don’t like surprises?”

“Then I’ll make doubly certain you like this one.”

When the interior of the car got too quiet to suit her, she said, “I understand you had a meeting with the mayor the other day.”

He grinned and gave her a sideways glance. “Yes, that’s right.”

Was he going to tell her anything? When moments passed and he didn’t, she figured he wouldn’t. Then he said, “That was awful what happened to the Dunnings Financial Group. I understand a lot of people lost their jobs. However, I’m glad they got a good severance package.”

“I’m glad, too, but unfortunately it doesn’t extend to our school.”

He looked at her when he brought the car to a stop. “What do you mean?”

She wished she hadn’t said anything, but since she had, she might as well give him an answer. “Every year the school puts on this huge holiday play. This year a well-known movie director from Hollywood, who is a good friend of Pam’s, is volunteering his time here. It will be the biggest production the school has put on so far and also the most expensive. Unfortunately, Dunnings was our major sponsor. Their bankruptcy pretty much left us in a bind.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Will you have to cancel the event?”

“I hope not. I’m working hard to find a replacement sponsor.” She stopped talking when she looked out the car’s window. “Why are we at the airport?”

He brought the car to a stop and smiled over at her. “Because we’ll be dining on my jet.”

* * *

Jaxon thought the look of surprise on Nadia’s face was not only priceless, but it was also one of the most sensuous expressions he’d ever seen. The way her lips parted in an “oh” followed by her eyes lighting up and ending with a smile that spread wide across her lips. That smile went straight to his heart. Not that there had been any doubts about his feelings for her before, but if there had been, they had dissolved at that moment.

“You’re kidding, right?” she asked him, her smile widening ever more.

“No, I’m not kidding.”

When she realized he was serious, she rocked her body in her seat in a happy dance.

He threw his head back and laughed, loving her excitement. He hadn't been sure what to expect when he'd thought of the idea. "I guess that means you have no problem with flying."

"Heck no. I think the Denver Westmorelands shied away from owning a corporate jet because of what happened to their parents, but those Atlanta-based Westmorelands have no reservations about it. And flying is a way of life for those Outlaws in Alaska."

Jaxon knew that to be true. The Westmoreland triplets, Clint, Cole and Casey, were licensed pilots. And because of Alaska's road system, people living there owned more planes than cars. All six of the Outlaws owned planes. In fact, Garth, the oldest Outlaw son, was married to Regan, their company's pilot.

It seemed Nadia was in a good mood and he intended to take full advantage of her joviality. "Ready to go aboard?"

"Yes."

Now he was glad for all the special arrangements he had made. He had gone out of his way to impress her tonight. Getting out of the car, he came around on her side to open the door. This time he tried not to be so obvious when he glanced down at her legs. Taking her hand, he walked over to the plane, where his pilot and flight host were waiting. Introductions were made before he escorted her up the steps.

"My parents always had the company jet, and I had a Cessna since I rarely did international travel. But now that I'm in charge, I decided to get a jet that fit my needs. I've only had this one for six months," he told her when he saw her glancing around curiously.

"This is nice," Nadia said. "The only other time I've been on a corporate jet was during one of Charm's bridal showers. It was given to her in flight by Regan. We had so much fun during the three-hour flight. We never did land. The entire shower was held while we were in the sky."

"Who was the pilot that night?" he asked as he escorted her over to the seats. He would give her a tour of the jet later.

"A girlfriend of Regan's. Garth had volunteered but he was told no husbands or significant others were allowed on that trip. I'm glad. Things got pretty wild."

"Were there half-naked men on board?"

She threw up her head and laugh. "I'll never tell. Don't you know what goes on at the bridal shower stays at the bridal shower? I'm sure men have

the same rule for the bachelor party.”

“I guess they do.” He was tempted to say not only was that the rule for a bachelor party but that had been the case for that poker tournament a couple of months ago as well.

Nadia sat in the seat facing him and they both followed instructions when the pilot told them to buckle up. She was deliberately looking everywhere else but at him. That was fine since he had no intentions of looking anywhere else other than at her.

“You have big plans for the weekend?” he asked, not just for conversational purposes but as a way to get her to glance over at him. She did so and when their gazes met, he felt it. He had a feeling she did, too. The attraction was stronger than ever. He was beginning to think that the more they were alone the more the sexual chemistry increased between them.

She looked over at him at the exact moment the plane began moving down the runway. “Not big plans. Normal chores that need to be done. What about you?”

“I’m flying home tomorrow. My parents like to see their only child every once and a while.”

She nodded. “You’re close to them?”

“Very.”

“I heard they were nice.”

He could tell by her expression that she regretted saying that because it meant his name had come up in a discussion she’d had with someone. Before he could ask who had told her that, she cleaned up her comment by adding, “I believe Paige mentioned she met them at one of Jess’s fundraising dinners.”

“She did. My parents are big on making financial contributions to their favorite political candidates. Now that they consider Jess, as well as Reggie Westmoreland, as family, they wanted to attend and do their part.”

“That was kind of them.”

“I have kind parents.” He truly meant that. As long as he could remember they’d always been there for him, encouraging him to be his own man. The only thing they’d demanded of him was to always have respect for others, especially women. Now was not the time to tell her that he’d told his parents about her, and they were looking forward to meeting her.

When the plane had leveled off in the sky and the pilot indicated it was okay to move around, he unbuckled his seat belt and stood. By the time he had walked over to her, she had unbuckled her own and was standing as well.

“You’re ready to show me around?” she asked excitedly.

In all honesty, he wanted to do a lot more than that. Taking her hand, he said, “Yes, I am ready to show you around before dinner is served.”

Eight

Nadia was impressed by everything she saw on Jaxon's private jet. From the thick rich carpeting to the smooth leather seats in his sitting room. However, what touched her most was the table set for dinner. It was just as impressive as any table in a five-star restaurant.

He introduced her to the chef, who was also on the flight. The food had tasted wonderful and she'd wasted no time letting the chef know. Dessert was banana pudding cake. Evidently Jaxon had inquired about her favorite dessert the way she'd done for him.

"I can't eat a thing more," she said, pushing back from the table. "Your cook outdid himself with dinner and so did you."

He chuckled. "I didn't cook."

"No, but you arranged all of this," she said, using her hand to encompass the dining table. "A beautifully set table, great food, champagne and a delicious dessert, all the time while flying high in the sky. Things can't get any better than this."

In all honestly, that's what bothered her. She hadn't wanted to be impressed by anything he'd done tonight. She had decided tonight would be her chance to use any means possible to make him think twice about pursuing any type of relationship with her. But whenever he gave her a warm smile, like he was doing now, she couldn't stop the desire flowing through her. Desire she knew he not only felt but reciprocated.

Why was the sexual chemistry stronger between them tonight than it had been at dinner last week? She figured that kiss had a lot to do with it. The same kiss she couldn't get off her mind. The kiss that had her licking her lips every morning and night, and a few times in between, to see if his taste was still there.

"Do you want to go in the sitting room to look out at the stars?"

She hesitated a minute before she said, "Yes, I'd love to."

"I think you'll love the view," he said, grabbing the bottle of wine off the table.

"I'm sure I will."

The sitting room had a beautiful leather sofa that faced a huge window. It was a beautiful night and the sky was clear and the stars appeared to be everywhere. They'd been in the air a couple of hours now and every so often the pilot would announce what state they were flying over. They were now in Idaho and would do a zig-zag across Montana before returning to Wyoming.

"Too bad Dylan is away on a concert tour and Charm is with him. Otherwise we could have dropped in to say hello," he said.

"That would have been nice," she said, easing down on the sofa. Charm owned her own Cessna and Dylan's ranch in Idaho had an airstrip. The flight distance between their ranch and Gamble was less than an hour. Charm would often fly into the Gamble airport, pick up Nadia and two of them would fly to Westmoreland Country.

Charm's husband, Dylan, was an award-winning singer and guitarist. He'd won another award earlier that year and had called Charm on stage while making his acceptance speech to introduce her to all his fans.

Nadia settled down on the sofa and was surprised when Jaxon came to sit beside her. She thought he would take the single chair across from her and quickly scooted over to make room.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" he said, refilling their wineglasses.

"Yes, and you were right, I love the view."

"So do I."

She noticed he wasn't looking out the window but his gaze was on her. Was he flirting with her? The last thing she wanted was to send out an erroneous message that she was in any way entertaining the thought of what he claimed the other night. Namely, that he intended to marry her. Rissa thought she should at least be flattered, but she wasn't.

"So what do you see when you glance out the window?" she asked him.

He looked out the window and then back at her. "I see an array of beautiful stars dotting a dark sky and a quarter moon peeking out at them. Now ask me what I see when I look at you."

She wasn't sure she wanted to know as she felt the heat flowing between them. However, drawing in a deep breath, she asked, "So, what do you see?"

"A woman I want to dance with."

She lifted a brow. "Dance?"

"Yes. So will you dance with me?"

"Without music?"

"What makes you think that?"

She was about to say because no music was playing when he reached for the remote on the table. With a press of his finger, music came through speakers. Of course it would be a slow tune.

Standing, he reached out his hand to her. "Please dance with me, Nadia. I need to hold you in my arms."

She could make a comeback that she didn't need to hold him in hers, but the thought of having her body pressed to his while his arms were wrapped around her was too tempting to deny.

Placing her hand in his, he eased her to her feet and when he gently pulled her into his arms, she didn't hesitate. The moment her body pressed against his, it seemed everything woman inside of her went into overdrive. Instinctively she rested her head on his chest and inhaled his manly fragrance.

This was not supposed to be happening. She had done her research, had looked up the top twenty ways to scare a man away. Yet she hadn't tried any of the suggestions tonight. She had been too impressed with sharing dinner with him thirty thousand feet off the ground to concentrate on anything other than him.

She needed to take a big pause and catch her breath. But not now. Not even tonight. Jaxon was in control, and she didn't want to fight against this. His looks, his aroma, his personality and the way he made her feel...

No matter what, she had to get a grip on reality. The last thing she wanted to do was encourage him in his nonsense that he would marry her one day.

"I love dancing with you, Nadia."

His low, husky and sexy voice sent her heart pounding. "Do you?"

"Can't you tell?"

If he was hinting at the fact that dancing with her had aroused him, then yes, she could tell. She wondered if he could tell she was just as aroused. Her breasts, as they pressed against his chest, felt sensitive. Could he tell her nipples had hardened? Were poking into him?

"Are you okay, sweetheart?"

She wondered why he used that term of endearment. She wasn't his sweetheart. And why had he even asked her that? Had she moaned and hadn't realized she had done so? Was he feeling the intense heat leaving her body and going to his? She lifted her head off his chest to look at him and wished she hadn't. The dark eyes staring down at her caused flutters in her stomach.

"I'm fine, Jaxon, why do you ask?"

"No reason."

There had to have been a reason, but she knew better than to push the issue. She was smart enough to know when and how to operate on the side of caution. Tonight, she would ignore any endearments or sexual innuendos. Deliberate or otherwise.

The music stopped and then another tune began playing. She was going to suggest they sit this one out, cool things off a minute, but when he pulled her closer Nadia decided not to say anything at all. She liked the feel of the warm hard body pressed close to hers, the even breathing near her ear and the way he gently rubbed strong hands up and down her back. Point blank, more than anything, she wanted to savor the moment.

As if he had the ability to read her thoughts, he whispered, "I love holding you in my arms and will find any excuse to do so."

"Even by dancing?" She lifted her face from his chest to ask him while looking into his dark eyes.

"Yes, even by dancing. But it's just the beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Our courtship that will end in marriage."

* * *

Jaxon saw the flare of defiance that leaped into Nadia's eyes and wondered if she knew how beautiful she looked when she was filled with fire. His gaze then shifted to her mouth. A mouth he was tempted to kiss and devour.

"Why can't you get it through that thick skull that a marriage between us won't be happening, Jaxon?"

He shifted his gaze back to her eyes. "Mainly because I believe it will, Nadia."

She let out a frustrated sigh. "Why are you being so difficult?"

"Why are you?" he countered.

"I am not being difficult, just realistic. I don't know how things operate in your world. Maybe the wealthy Ravnels of Virginia are used to doing things this way."

"What way?"

"Saying what they want and then getting it regardless of people's feelings, thoughts or pride?"

"That's not how my family operates, Nadia."

"Isn't it?"

“No.”

“Well, that’s how it seems to me.” She pushed out of his arms and placed her hands on her hips. “What would make you think I’d want to marry a man who doesn’t love me or one who I don’t love? Did it ever occur to you that I might want a marriage where I know my husband loved me, and I wouldn’t have to worry about...”

He frowned. “About what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Jaxon thought it did. The Westmorelands claimed that as far as they knew, Nadia had dated on occasion but had never been in a serious or exclusive relationship. Now he wondered if there had been someone they hadn’t known about. Some man who had broken her heart?

“I think it does matter,” he said.

“No, it doesn’t.”

He decided not to push the issue. “All right then. Let’s talk about the issue of love. You don’t think two people can fall in love with each other?” he asked, deciding not to admit he was already there. No need to bring that into the conversation when she wouldn’t believe him.

“Yes, but they fall in love first and then talk about marriage and not the other way around, Jaxon.”

“The reason I talked about marriage was because I wanted to be honest with you up front, to let you know my intentions toward you were honorable, Nadia. I am not a womanizer or a man on the prowl. I want you as part of my future.”

“But you don’t know me.”

“I know you are a very beautiful and desirable woman. A woman who is deserving of a man who will love you, cherish you and make you happy.”

“And you believe you are that man?”

“I know I am. All I need is a chance for you to get to know me and for me to get to know you better.”

She shook her head. “What if once you get to know me you don’t like me after all? But I discover I like you? All I can see is another heartbreak, Jaxon, and I won’t go through something like that again.”

Another heartbreak? He’d guessed right. At that moment the pilot asked them to take their seats for the landing. They had returned to Gamble. He inwardly cursed the timing. It was just as he’d suspected. Some man had broken her heart. Was it someone she’d met during the six years she’d been

in college? Had it been someone she'd met after moving back to Gamble? One of those cowboys she'd gotten so uptight about?

He needed to convince her that they should spend more time together. It would only be then that she would believe he'd never break her heart. Instead of saying anything else to him, she left the sitting room to return to her seat in the cabin.

By the time he got there she was already buckled in and staring out the window. She didn't even look over at him.

After sitting down and snapping his seat belt in place, he glanced over at her. "Nadia?"

She turned from the window to look at him. "Yes?"

"I want to see you again. Spend time with you."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

He disagreed—he wanted to get to know her—but one thing he knew how to be was flexible. Normally, he wasn't one who liked changing the rules of any game, but for her he would. Apparently telling her up front that he wanted to marry her hadn't been a good idea. Yet he couldn't backtrack on it now or else she would think he really didn't know his own heart and mind.

"I'm not interested in anything other than an acquaintance type of relationship while you're in Gamble," she continued. "Of course when we're around the Westmorelands and Outlaws it can extend to one of friendship. There's no way we can avoid it being any other way when we're there."

He didn't like what he was hearing. "And if I don't want that kind of relationship?"

She frowned at him. "You don't have a choice."

She was wrong—he did have a choice—but he would let her assume she was calling the shots. "I will give you what you want."

"Thank you."

"However, I am open to you changing your mind at any time."

"I won't change my mind, Jaxon. Unlike some women, I don't need a man in my life."

He nodded. More than anything he was determined to make sure she did, and that man would be him.

Nine

“I would help you out if I could, Nadia, you know that. However, I just donated to the community’s college scholarship drive.”

Nadia released a disappointed sigh. “I understand, Marv. Tell Harriett and the boys hello for me.”

“Will do. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Nadia disconnected the call and marked Marvin Booster’s name off the list of possible sponsors for the holiday play. She, Marvin and his wife, Harriett, had gone to the same church as kids when their parents were alive. He owned one of the largest ranches in Gamble and was a big supporter of community projects.

She frowned when she saw the next name, Fletcher Mallard. Shaking her head, she marked through his name as well, refusing to call and ask him for anything. Fletcher had been Pam’s fiancé years ago and swore Nadia and her sisters were the reason Pam hadn’t married him. He would conveniently forget the lie he’d told to get Pam to agree to marry him in the first place. It was the lie Dillon exposed at the wedding in the nick of time.

Nevertheless, the man still wanted to blame Nadia and her sisters anyway. Unfortunately, he was wealthier now than before. His chain of grocery stores had grown and was in almost every state in the Midwest and still expanding. She’d also heard he was on his fourth wife.

She was about to pick up the phone to call the next person when the buzzer on her desk sounded. Pressing the button, she asked, “Yes, China?”

“Someone is here to see you. A Mr. Jaxon Ravel.”

A frown settled on Nadia’s face. Why was Jaxon here? She hadn’t seen or talked to him since that night he’d taken her to dinner on board his jet. That had been over a week ago. She would be lying if she said she hadn’t thought about him because she had. More times than she wanted to.

Telling him there would only be an acquaintanceship between them had meant no kisses and no holding hands. When he had taken her home, he had walked her to the door, told her how much he had enjoyed her company and

made sure she had gotten inside the house safely before leaving.

“Ms. Novak?”

Releasing a deep sigh, she said, “Please show Mr. Ravel in.”

“Trust me when I say it will be my pleasure, Miss Novak.”

Nadia rolled her eyes as she moved from behind her desk. She recognized that voice. It was the same one China used whenever one of the Westmoreland or Outlaw men arrived in town and would take her to lunch. She could understand a young girl of China’s age getting all hot and bothered seeing such eye candy, and Jaxon was definitely that.

The door opened and seeing Jaxon again took her breath away. Literally. Why did he have to look so ultraenticing and mouthwateringly appealing in his business suit? Looking like the billion dollars he probably was. And why couldn’t she control her gaze from roaming over him, appreciating how his muscles filled out that jacket?

“Jaxon,” she said, moving toward him to shake the hand he’d extended. She had to fight back the reaction she felt the moment their hands touched. “It’s good seeing you again.”

Too late, she watched China’s brow inch up in curiosity. Her administrative assistant had latched on to the word *again*, which meant Nadia and Jaxon had seen each other before.

“It’s good seeing you again, as well, Nadia,” he said with a smile that complemented everything about him. His masculine power and that virile strength were definitely radiating from him today.

Nadia glanced to China. “Thanks for escorting Mr. Ravel to my office. That will be all.”

Once China had left and closed the door behind her, Nadia turned back to Jaxon. “And the reason for your visit?” she asked, offering him a seat in the chair in front of her desk.

“The reason I’m here, Nadia, is strictly business.”

“Is it?” she asked, going back around her desk to sit down.

“Yes.”

“And what kind of business is there that would bring you here?”

It was only after she’d taken her seat that he took the one she’d offered him. As usual he was displaying impeccable manners. She wished the way his slacks stretched across a pair of masculine thighs when he sat down didn’t send her heart racing.

“An article will be appearing in the *Gamble Daily Tribune* tomorrow that

Ravnel Technologies has acquired over fifteen hundred acres of land to expand our business here.”

She couldn't help the smile that spread across her lips. For both him and the city. “Congratulations. That's a lot of land.”

“Yes, it is. The city was instrumental in helping me acquire what I needed.”

Nadia could just imagine. They probably saw it as a boom to Gamble's economy.

“Thanks for letting me know, but you didn't have to come all the way over here to tell me.” In a way she wished he hadn't. When it came to Jaxon, out of sight, out of mind worked best. She'd managed to get by on her dreams of him at bedtime and memories of their one and only kiss.

“That's not why I'm here.”

“Oh? Then what is the purpose of your visit?”

“To offer you a proposal. I decided to do so here first before moving on to some other entity.”

Now he had her curious. “And what is this proposal?”

He leaned forward in his chair as if to make sure he had her absolute attention. There was no need for him to do that since he'd had it the moment he'd walked into her office. “Ravnel Technologies wants to replace the Dunning's Financial Group as the sponsor for this year's holiday play.”

She didn't say anything for a minute because she was too stunned to speak. His company partnering with the school for the play would be wonderful. A prayer that was answered. A...

A thought suddenly popped into her head, and she looked at Jaxon. He was staring at her. For some reason she couldn't turn away and the thought that had taken root in her head began growing. She broke eye contact and looked down at the notepad on her desk and then back at him. He was still staring at her.

“Why, Jaxon?”

He lifted a brow. “Why what?”

“Why do you want to partner with Dream Makers Acting Academy? What do you think you're going to get out of doing so?”

* * *

Jaxon figured there were several answers he could give her. The main one

being her idea of being acquaintances wasn't working for him and he was determined to make sure it didn't work for her either. The moment he had walked into her office, everything faded to black except her. Desire, to a degree he had never felt before for any woman, had rushed through him while he had taken in every single thing about her. Her dark slacks and pink blouse made her look feminine as hell, and her hair, a mass of locks around her face, highlighted her features and emphasized what a totally beautiful woman she was.

Now he was here and she was there, right within his radar, and he had come up with a plan that would keep her there. But he wouldn't admit that. Her question meant she suspected he had an ulterior motive for choosing this school to partner with. She was right, yet he would not only downplay her suspicions, but he also intended to eliminate them completely. He was a businessman and she'd never seen the business side of him before. Now she would.

“What exactly are you asking me, Nadia?”

She leaned forward and placed her elbows on her desk to rest her chin on her hands. Her eyes pierced into his, but he had no problem with it because his gaze was just as penetrating. “Does your decision have anything to do with me?”

He had to fight back telling her that everything had something to do with her. Instead, he said, “To be quite honest, it only pertains to you because you mentioned last week that you needed a sponsor for the play. My reason for deciding to replace Dunning's Financial Group has everything to do with my relationship to the Westmorelands and Outlaws. As you indicated the other night, you and I don't have a relationship, we have an acquaintanceship. I made it clear then, and I'm making it clear now, that I will abide by your wishes.” He paused before continuing, “Ravel Technologies likes to bond with the towns they become a part of. When we purchased that land in Forbes last year we partnered with the Boys and Girls Clubs there. Therefore, it would make perfect sense to align my company with an institution connected to a group I now consider as family.”

He allowed a lull in the conversation to let what he'd said to sink in before adding, “If you have a problem with it, please say so.”

“I don't have a problem with it.”

He nodded. “The sponsorship I'm offering is strictly business. You will be required to periodically keep my company abreast of how things are going

with the play. Will you agree to that?”

She stared at him and a part of him knew Nadia was stubborn enough to say no, she didn't agree. She had just that much nerve and was just that defiant. Seconds had almost ticked into a full minute before she said, “Yes, I'll agree.”

“Good. My administrative assistant, Langley Easton, will be contacting you later today to complete the necessary paperwork and ask questions for the newspaper article.”

“The newspaper article?”

“Yes. Sometime this week your local newspaper will announce my company's plans to build here. Whenever such an announcement is made, Ravel Technologies uses that opportunity to assure the citizens of our commitment to the community by making it known what nonprofit organization we plan to partner with the first year. Typically, we rotate annually. Since this is almost the end of the year, it was decided that sponsoring the holiday play would work in our favor. In January, we will open it up so other local nonprofits can apply.”

“I see.”

He stood. “Do you have any other questions for me?”

“No. I don't have any questions.”

“Like I said, Langley will be contacting you later today. However, at any time you can reach me at this number,” he said, extending his business card to her.

“I have your number already.”

“You have my personal number. This is my business number.”

She took the card. “Thank you.”

“Have a good day, Nadia.” Then, without saying anything else, he walked out of her office.

An hour later Jaxon walked into his hotel room. He hoped what he'd told Nadia had squashed her suspicions about his company's motives for the sponsorship. He had finished ordering room service when his cell phone rang. He couldn't help but smile as he clicked on. “Dad. Are you and Mom back?” His parents had flown to Barcelona. No special occasion, just a two-week getaway. They did that a lot now that they'd both retired.

“Yes, we're back but not for long. Your mom wants to spend a couple of weeks in Toronto before the cold weather sets in.”

Jaxon nodded. It was no secret that Ingrid Ravel didn't like cold weather.

She barely tolerated it. "I take it Barcelona was nice."

"Yes, it was. And I understand we've acquired more land."

"Yes, we have. It was a good deal. Like Forbes, they presented an economic development plan that will benefit the town and our company."

"That's good to hear." Although Jaxon kept his father in the loop, he appreciated that Arnett Ravel never questioned his judgment about any business decisions. "And just so you know, Ravel Technologies is sponsoring a holiday play being produced by the acting school here."

"What's the title of the play?"

"*It's a Wonderful Life.*"

"That's one of your mother's holiday favorites. We can't wait to see it."

So, in other words, they would be visiting Gamble. Jaxon knew his parents. Ever since that day he'd shared with them that Nadia Novak was the woman he intended to marry, they'd been anxious to meet her.

He talked to his father for a few minutes more before they ended the call. He had time to shower before room service arrived with dinner. Getting into bed before nine was first on his list. If Nadia thought she had seen the last of him for a while, then she was mistaken.

Ten

“Did he really say that, Nadia?” Rissa asked, after taking a sip of her coffee and leaning forward in her chair. It was early morning and the two of them were sitting in Nadia’s office, sharing coffee and chitchatting like they usually did. Nadia had just told Rissa what had happened yesterday with Jaxon.

“He didn’t have to. Giving me his business card said it all as far as I’m concerned.”

Rissa rolled her eyes over her cup of coffee. “Well, you did want him to leave you alone. Not that I thought he was bothering you. Telling a woman of his intentions to marry her is not a bad thing. In fact, I think it’s romantic.”

Now it was Nadia who rolled her eyes. “I don’t agree and you’re missing the point.”

“Okay, what is the point?” Rissa asked, leaning back in her chair.

“First of all, the more I think about it, the more I get upset that Jaxon had the nerve, the very gall, to tell me of his plans to marry me. He probably only did it because some men have an entitlement complex. Benson thought he was entitled to me and so did Hoyle.”

“And?” Rissa asked, as if she expected more.

“And once I put Jaxon in his place by letting him know I wouldn’t tolerate his foolishness, he stopped.”

Confusion lined Rissa’s features. “But that’s what you wanted him to do, right?”

“But he didn’t put up a fight, which proves he wasn’t serious about anything to begin with.”

“You don’t know that, Nadia.”

“Yes, I do. Nobody can turn their feelings off like that. Granted, he hadn’t said he felt anything for me, but still. It’s obvious he no longer wants to marry me.”

“And that bothers you, doesn’t it?” Rissa asked, giving her an odd look. A look Nadia had gotten used to over the years. It was one of Rissa’s analytical looks. There were times she thought her friend was wasting her time in the

financial industry and should own a psychiatry office.

Nadia knew it was imperative that she made her best friend understand. “What I don’t like is the thought of him being overconfident in thinking he could marry me and telling me such when he had no intentions of doing it.”

Rissa chuckled. “Now you’re being dramatic. You either want Jaxon to show interest in you or you don’t. You told him not to and he is following your request. Now you’re upset about it. That makes no sense, Nadia, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless...deep down you did like the thought of him wanting to marry you one day.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Rissa tilted her head. “Is it? You act offended that he took you at your word and is leaving you alone. Had he continued to pursue you, then you could have complained that you were being harassed. So, being the gentleman you say that he is, he is abiding by your wishes. Now the acquaintanceship has moved to a strictly business relationship and for some reason that is bothering you. I’d think you would appreciate him stepping in as a sponsor for the play. That’s wonderful and takes a load off your mind.”

“Yes, and I do appreciate it.”

“So, what’s the problem? What’s the real reason your panties are in a twist?”

Nadia didn’t say anything for a minute and then she said in a soft voice, “Whether or not I wanted him to pursue me or not, the moment I pushed back he moved on. That meant he wasn’t serious about a future with me anyway.”

Rissa smiled. “You like him, don’t you?”

Nadia shrugged. “He was moving too fast. He was talking marriage and didn’t even know me.”

“Then you should have told him to slow down. Instead, you sent him away. Do you know what I think?”

Nadia didn’t want to ask but figured her best friend would tell her anyway. “No, what?”

“That you like Jaxon more than you want to admit, and that you’ll give anything for another kiss, another taste of his mouth, his tongue, the opportunity to be your first rumple between the sheets and—”

“Rissa!”

“Just keeping it real, my friend.”

“I refuse to involve myself with a man who only wanted to connect himself with me because...”

Rissa lifted a brow. “Because of what?”

Nadia ran a hand down her face. “I honestly don’t know.”

Rissa stood after checking her watch. “Then maybe it’s time you stop assuming and find out the answers. The real answers, Nadia. And how about taking a look in the mirror. You’re beautiful. That’s why he wanted to connect with you. You’re not a bad catch and Jaxon Ravel isn’t either. Just so you know, the word is out and he’s already at the top of every single woman’s hit list in town.”

After draining the last of her coffee and tossing the cup in a nearby trash can, Rissa smiled over at her and said, “See you tomorrow. Same place. Same time. However, I certainly hope you have a different attitude.”

By the end of the day, Nadia was clearing off her desk and getting ready to leave when her cell phone rang. She smiled upon recognizing the caller. “Hello, Pammie.” Calling her oldest sister by her nickname whenever they spoke was something Nadia hadn’t outgrown.

“Nadia, I just heard the good news. I understand Jaxon will replace the Dunnings Financial Group as the sponsor of this year’s holiday play. That’s wonderful!”

Pam was the second person to sing Jaxon’s praises. Rissa had been the first. Nadia figured there would be others tomorrow when news of his company expansion to Gamble, as well as his being sponsor of the play, appeared in tomorrow’s newspaper. His personal assistant, Langley Easton, had called and introduced herself. The woman sounded very professional and young.

That had prompted Nadia, out of curiosity, to check out Ravel Technologies’ website. Now she wished she hadn’t. Not only was Miss Easton professional and young. She was also attractive and single. It said she had been Jaxon’s personal assistant for a few years. Had the two ever dated? Been romantically involved? Why on earth did Nadia care if they had?

“Nadia?”

“Yes?”

“You are glad about it, too, aren’t you? I’m sure you had everything under control as far as getting a replacement, but Jaxon has made your job easier.”

“Yes, and I appreciate him doing so. But...”

“But what?”

Pam was the last person Nadia needed to tell about her complex relationship with Jaxon. But then, to be honest, she and Jaxon didn't have a relationship. That thought made her ask her sister something she had wondered about for years. "Pammie, at the time you met Dillon you were engaged to marry Fletcher. What made you fall in love with Dillon when you were promised to another man?"

Pam didn't say anything for a moment, and then said, "I didn't love Fletcher. Our marriage was to be one of convenience. However, I'd agreed to a sexual relationship since we both wanted kids. But I looked at my engagement to Fletcher as a business deal, which is why I wouldn't sleep with him before the wedding."

Pam paused and Nadia figured she was remembering that time fifteen years ago. "That day when you, Jill and Paige called me outside to let me know a man was there to see me, and I saw Dillon for myself, engaged or not engaged, the moment I gazed into his eyes I was not only attracted to him, but knew, if given the chance, I could feel more."

If given the chance she could feel more...

Nadia wondered if it could be that way for her with Jaxon. "Why didn't you fight it? After all, you were engaged."

"Trust me, I tried. But there are some things you aren't equipped to fight. An attraction that could lead to falling in love is one of them."

"Did it scare you? Your inability to resist your attraction?" Nadia asked.

Pam chuckled. "It petrified me because I didn't know Dillon. I had just met him and he certainly didn't know me. Yet I felt things for him that I hadn't felt for Fletcher. I wasn't even physically attracted to Fletcher. With Dillon it was another story altogether. The sexual chemistry between us was strong."

Nadia would admit the same thing between her and Jaxon. There was something about him that stirred sensations deep within her each and every time they were near each other. Just dancing with him the other night had jarred her senses in a way they'd never been jarred before.

"The sexual chemistry between us was even stronger whenever we were alone," Pam cut into Nadia's thoughts to say. "I knew I was in deep trouble that day he returned to go through that trunk in the attic. We were at the house alone."

"Oh." Just like the night Nadia and Jaxon had been alone when she'd invited him to dinner. The same house.

"Is there a reason you're asking me these questions, Nadia?"

“No. There’s no particular reason, Pammie. I just think you and Dillon make the best couple ever.”

“Thanks. There was a connection between us that we were both trying hard to ignore, given the fact I was an engaged woman.”

“What if Dillon had told you he wanted to marry you after you guys had only known each other a few days? Would you have broken things off with Fletcher to marry him?”

“No. Although I was attracted to Dillon, I didn’t feel I knew him and he didn’t know me. But then I’d agreed to marry Fletcher because I had thought I knew him when in essence, I didn’t know him at all. I’ve discovered people can fall in love without fully knowing each other or knowing everything about each other. It has to start with something. I’m glad that once I discovered a connection between me and Dillon that I didn’t fight it. And that connection between us, combined with a hefty dose of sexual chemistry, got stronger every time we saw each other.”

Nadia took in everything Pam had said. Had Rissa been right? Had she overreacted to Jaxon’s claim that he intended to marry her? She would admit she’d felt a connection to him that got stronger each time they saw each other. Did that mean anything?

“Well, I’ll let you go, Nadia. It’s time for you to leave for today, right?” Pam said.

“Yes. I was just wrapping things up.”

“Have a safe drive home. And Nadia?”

“Yes, Pammie?”

There was a pause and then, “Nothing. Goodbye.”

* * *

Jaxon opened the paper and saw that news of Ravel Technologies’ expansion into Gamble was all over the front page. His company’s PR department had also arranged a slate of local interviews, and Langley had a list of other nonprofit projects his company intended to be a part of during the coming year.

Once he’d made the decision to expand his company beyond Virginia, he knew what that would entail, from strategy to execution. One of the first things to do was strengthen the company’s presence in the chosen community. In Forbes, his company had hosted a fundraising event to raise

money for a new building for the Boys and Girls Club. It was to be built on land that Ravel Technologies had donated. Not only had they donated the land, but also would match all contributions made.

In Gamble, he would start with sponsoring the holiday play. He'd seen the budget but wanted Nadia to think bigger. No reason to host the event in the school's auditorium when there was a theater in town. He'd had Langley check it out already.

He had finished drinking his coffee and was about to go into the bedroom of his hotel suite to get dressed when his phone rang. It was his business line. Heat flowed through his body at the possibility it was Nadia. He picked up the phone, and saw the call was from his administrative assistant. "Yes, Langley?"

"Mr. Ravel, I got a call from Sue Ellen Donovan, talk show host of *Good Morning Wyoming*. A show produced at a television station that's located in the valley between Gamble and Jackson Hole. The show not only broadcasts in those two areas but several other towns scattered about. She wanted to know if you're available one day this week to appear on her show. She's interested in why you selected Gamble for expansion."

The real reason, he thought, was a well-guarded secret. He'd done television interviews in the past but usually Paul Maloney, the person in charge of PR for the company, handled that sort of thing. "Is there a reason Paul can't do the interview?"

"Ms. Donovan specifically asked for you."

Jaxon rubbed his chin, feeling somewhat annoyed. "Did she?"

"Yes. She said it would have a greater impact if you did it. She thinks it would give the interview more community appeal. I told her in that case she should also invite Nadia Novak of the Dream Makers Acting Academy. That way the two of you could inform the viewers how Ravel Technologies' move into the community will benefit Gamble and surrounding areas. Already your company has partnered with the academy to sponsor their holiday play. Personally, I think publicity for the school might boost interest in nearby towns, which will result in more ticket sales."

Jaxon smiled, liking the way Langley thought. It would also be a way for him and Nadia to share space, even if it was only on a stage at a television studio. "Since it's a community piece I agree that both Ms. Novak and I should be interviewed together."

"Does that mean you will do the interview?"

“Yes.”

“I’ll suggest that Ms. Donovan call Ms. Novak to invite her to join you on the show. I’ve checked your schedule and this Friday morning will work for you. It airs at ten.”

“Make sure that date and time works for Ms. Novak as well. If not, I expect the station to be flexible with both of us.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jaxon hung up the phone thinking his day was off to a good start. Things could not have worked out more perfectly if he’d arranged it himself. He knew Nadia was still trying to figure him out. To fight what she’d felt, and, for whatever reason, she refused to lower her guard not even an inch. He knew before he could gain a place in her heart, he would have to gain her trust. That also meant she had to deal with whatever pain still lingered from a love that had gone bad. A love he had to somehow convince her hadn’t been meant to be anyway.

His father had told him that it had taken his mother almost a year to see the light. Jaxon wasn’t sure he would last a year. He wanted Nadia just that much. He wanted her physically, sexually and all those ways in between. But he also wanted her for more than that. He wanted her to be a part of his life, the mother of his children, his partner in love until death do them part.

He had told Dillon he wouldn’t break Nadia’s heart, and he intended to keep that promise. However, the one thing Dillon and the others failed to realize was that if something went wrong, he might be the one who ended up with the broken heart.

* * *

Nadia returned to her office from lunch thinking that everyone in town must have read the paper’s headlines. Rissa had brought her a copy with a huge smile on her face. No doubt she was hoping the bank she managed would get the Ravel business account.

Settling in the chair behind her desk, Nadia was pleased that the newspaper had also mentioned that Ravel Technologies would be the sponsor of this year’s holiday play. She had just taken a file off her desk when her buzzer went off. “Yes, China?”

“Sue Ellen Donovan, of *Good Morning Wyoming*, Station WKJP, is on the line.”

Nadia lifted a brow, wondering why Ms. Donovan would be calling. Earlier that year Nadia had reached out to the woman for an interview on one of their shows to promote the school's spring pageant. The woman had turned down the request saying the event wasn't important enough. Over the years, what had started out as a community awareness show was now only interviewing the rich and famous vacationing in the area. Specifically, on the ski slopes in Jackson Hole.

"Please put the call through, China."

"Okay."

Upon hearing the connection, Nadia said, "This is Nadia Novak. May I help you?"

"Ms. Novak, this is Sue Ellen Donovan of *Good Morning Wyoming*. We are excited that Ravel Technologies will be expanding into Gamble and we understand your school will benefit. On Friday morning we will be interviewing Mr. Ravel. Since we want this as a community piece, and it was announced that his company will be the major sponsor of your school's holiday play this year, it would be great if you could be a part of the show as well."

So now the show wanted to highlight something other than celebrities vacationing in the area? What a switch. "That sounds wonderful, and I would love to be on your show."

"Great. I'll see you Friday at ten."

After disconnecting the call, Nadia leaned back in her chair. She would take free publicity for the school any way she could get it. The students were excited about the news and that made her appreciative of Jaxon's company helping out. Specifically, bailing her out.

And he *had* bailed her out. He'd even admitted he'd selected the school not only because of the family connection, but also because she'd mentioned she didn't have a sponsor for the play. She would admit that was thoughtful of him. She would also admit something else. She did like him...a little. Her conversation with Pam yesterday had helped somewhat. Then there were the memories of the words Jaxon had spoken to her weeks ago.

My intention, Nadia Novak, is to marry you.

She quivered each and every time she remembered them. His words had been precise and he'd said them in a deep, husky voice that had flowed from those sexy lips of his. The tone had been so smooth it had taken her a minute to respond. Although at first she'd taken what he'd said as a tease, it didn't

take long for her to realize he was serious. Even when he shouldn't have been.

During their coffee and chitchat time this morning, Rissa had come down on Nadia pretty hard. Rissa had accused Nadia of always whining about what the men in the past had done to her and how much of a disappointment they'd been, of letting her past hurts and heartbreaks be the cause of her not having a relationship with a man. She'd gone on to say that Nadia would never find out if Jaxon was or was not the man for her without giving him a chance.

Well, it was a moot point now since all there was between them was business. Besides, one heartbreak had been enough for her. She wasn't ready to risk her heart on another. But what she *was* ready for was to be intimate with a man.

At twenty-eight it was probably past time and she probably would have eventually gone all the way with Hoyle if he hadn't acted like an ass about it. Like he thought not only was he entitled, but also that he was the best thing in her lifetime, as if she would be a fool to pass up the chance to roll between the sheets with him. He was a typical male who thought his balls were made of gold. That was the type of man she wanted no part of.

So far Jaxon hadn't come across that way. Other than thinking that one day they would marry, he was an okay guy. Even when she'd told him they could not have any type of relationship, he had respected her wishes. However, she couldn't get their kiss out of her mind. Just the memory of it made her heart pump wildly in her chest and her mouth hunger for more.

For years she'd heard Rissa, Jillian and, more recently, Paige whisper about how wonderful it was to share a bed with a man. She'd even come home from college unexpectedly one weekend and walked into Dillon's house to the sound of Pam screaming all over the place. It didn't take long to comprehend they'd been screams of pleasure and not pain.

Her curiosity about the kind of pleasure that could make you scream was what had sparked her interest in Hoyle. Now, after sharing that kiss with Jaxon, her curiosity was not just sparked; it had been ignited. Maybe it was time for her to finally do something about it.

How would he handle her change in attitude of them going from acquaintances to just business to personal and intimate? Would he think she was fickle as hell? Probably. More importantly, would it bother him that she was still a virgin at twenty-eight?

Years ago, she'd overheard a conversation between the two Westmoreland

cousins, Derringer and Riley, where they said the last kind of woman any man wanted to have in his bed was a virgin. Mainly because no man wanted to be a woman's first, and most men wanted an experienced woman in their bed. Because of Derringer's and Riley's reputations at the time, she'd had no reason to think they hadn't known what they were talking about. If that was true, then how would she handle what she definitely saw as a problem?

And another problem—Rissa had said the gold diggers around these parts would be honing their predatory skills on Jaxon. For some reason Nadia didn't like the thought. But then if Jaxon wanted to marry her like he claimed, wouldn't that give her an advantage over the other women?

How many times had Rissa said that Jaxon came across as the type of man who went after what he wanted? News flash! Nadia was that type of woman, and right now she wanted Jaxon. Not for anything long-term but rather for the short-term. She needed her curiosity appeased about sex once and for all to see what the hoopla was about.

Her approach to Jaxon had to be subtle. No man wanted to think he'd been targeted. That was another thing she'd heard the Westmoreland cousins say. A man didn't like being seduced. They preferred being the seducer. So how would that work for her?

Picking up the phone, she called Rissa. Her best friend should be on her way home from work now. Rissa picked up on the first ring and from the sound of it, she was in her car and the phone call was coming through by Bluetooth on her car's speakers.

"You're alone?" Nadia asked, wanting to make sure her kids weren't in the car with her.

"Yes, I'm alone. Why?"

"I have a question for you and I want it for your ears only. Just give me an answer, no inquiries, please. Will you do that?"

Rissa hesitated a minute, then said, "Yes."

Satisfied her friend would do what she said, Nadia asked, "How do you get a man to make love to you without seducing him?"

Eleven

Jaxon got out of his car and strolled up the walkway to Nadia's front door. She had left a message on his business phone last night while he'd been in the shower. She'd taken her car to the shop yesterday and it wouldn't be ready for today's trip to the valley. Nadia wanted to know if she could catch a ride with him. He had called her back and in the most professional voice he could deliver, he'd told her that yes, she could, and he would arrive to pick her up around eight.

To be quite honest, he'd been surprised by her call. Especially when her request meant they would be sharing the same vehicle to get to their destination. But then he figured since she was getting free publicity for the school and the holiday play she would tolerate anything or anyone. Including him.

The door opened and she stood there. She held his gaze and he held hers. Had it been just a few days ago when he'd seen her last? He should have been prepared but he wasn't. Now he couldn't help but zero in on everything about her. She was dressed in a two-piece business suit that made her look both professional and gorgeous to a degree that left him speechless. Her hair was pinned up on her head and twisted in a ball. Her makeup wasn't heavy; it was just enough not to overtake her natural beauty.

It seemed each and every time their paths crossed the sexual chemistry between them increased. Even now it flowed between them, and they both knew it and there wasn't a damn thing either of them could do about it. It was a raw physical force made up of her hormones and his testosterone that had taken over not only their minds but also their bodies.

The sound of his phone alarm going off broke the spell. He glanced away momentarily to pull it out of his pocket and turn it off. When he glanced back at her he saw the same sexual awareness in her features that he figured she saw in his. Only thing they could do was try and ignore it.

"Good morning, Nadia. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes. Just let me grab my coffee. Would you like a cup?"

If he said yes, that meant she would have to invite him in. That would

definitely be a change from the last time he'd been here, when she'd been waiting outside on the steps with no need for him to come inside.

"Yes, if you don't mind. I wasn't sure how traffic would be getting here this morning, so I didn't stop for coffee."

"No problem," she said, moving aside for him to come in.

He turned back to her when he heard the door close behind him. "You look nice."

"Thanks. So do you. And how do you like your coffee?"

"Black."

"Okay. I'll be back. I'm sure you want us to get on the road as soon as possible."

When she left and headed for the kitchen, he was drawn to that huge photo over the fireplace just like the last time he'd been here. That photo of her parents and sisters. This time he really studied it. She was the perfect combination of both parents. That's what he wanted for them. Him and her. Kids who would look like the both of them. He could envision a daughter with her eyes and smile; and a son who would have his height and mouth. It was a mouth his mom often referred to as the Ravel mouth. She said that was one of the first things that drew her to his father. The shape of his mouth and the darkness of his eyes.

"Here you are."

He turned around and she was there, handing him coffee in a to-go cup with a lid. "Thanks. Cup's convenient," he said, accepting the coffee she offered. Their hands touched in the process and he felt a flutter in the pit of his gut.

"I keep a ton of them here. I have two cups of coffee every morning. One before I leave here while getting dressed and another when I get to school, from Rissa."

"Rissa?"

"Yes, Marissa Phelps, my best friend."

He lifted a brow. "Your best friend is living in Gamble?"

"She's lived here all her life. We separated when I moved to Denver but we stayed in touch and went to the same college in Wyoming." She glanced at her watch and then at him. "I'm ready to leave if you are."

Yes, he was ready. The sooner they got out of this house the better. "I'm ready."

* * *

“Are you attending Cheyenne’s surprise birthday party?”

Nadia glanced over at Jaxon. They were out of Gamble’s city limits and were in the part of Wyoming the locals called the valley. It was the area between Gamble and Jackson Hole. Sparse towns were scattered about and most of the people were ranchers.

She nodded resolutely and said, “Yes, I plan to go. What about you?”

“Yes, I’m going. I wouldn’t think of missing it.”

She turned to look out the window again, at the objects they passed. Now they were on a two-lane road with very little traffic. The television station was in Valley Bluff, a small town between here and Jackson Hole.

Nadia thought about her conversation with Rissa yesterday. Needless to say, her best friend had given her an earful. According to Rissa, if a woman wanted a man and the man wanted her, then no seduction was needed. Just roll with the flow. She suggested that when Jaxon returned Nadia home, she should invite him in. When he kissed her goodbye, she should let him know she enjoyed it. That sort of thing fired up a man’s libido. A deeply aroused man could make you just as aroused as he was.

Nadia recalled how aroused Jaxon had been when dancing with her, and how aroused she’d gotten knowing he wanted her. Even now, while sharing car space with him, she was getting aroused. What on earth was happening to her? It was as if since she’d decided not to hold back where he was concerned, her body was yearning for what was to come. But what if he didn’t want to make the switch from business to pleasure? What if he’d decided she wasn’t worth the trouble and just wanted a platonic relationship between them?

What gave her hope was the strong sexual chemistry still flowing between them. So far they’d managed to keep up a steady stream of conversation, and she was glad of that. She’d taken the time to tell him of the excitement buzzing around town about his company’s plans to expand in Gamble. A lot of people were wondering what type of positions would be available. He’d told her about the job fair his company planned to hold in the spring.

Jaxon also shared that they anticipated it taking a year and a half for the Ravel Technologies’ state-of-the-art complex to be built. In the meantime, they would be leasing space—namely six floors—in the Lesswick Building in town. She appreciated him sharing that much information with her.

He asked her about the play and mentioned it was his mother’s favorite for

the holidays, and his parents looked forward to attending. She was glad to hear that and intended to make sure they got special seats in the front of the auditorium.

“I like Langley,” she said truthfully. They had talked a few times and the woman seemed efficient at her job. But still, Nadia couldn’t help wondering if Jaxon and the woman had ever been involved.

The car had come to a traffic light and he glanced over at her. “She keeps me pretty much on point.”

“Has she been your administrative assistant long?”

“Around four years now. I hired her right out of college.”

“She seems like a nice person and efficient in what she does.”

“She is. That’s the reason I hate losing her.”

Nadia raised her brow. *Losing her?* “She’s leaving?”

“Yes. Langley is getting married in June to Rick, her college sweetheart. He took a government job in Amsterdam, and she’ll be moving there after the wedding.”

Nadia didn’t say anything for a minute as she inwardly admitted that she’d been jealous of the beautiful young woman, which honestly didn’t make any sense. There was never a time she’d gotten jealous of any woman over a man. Such a thing just wasn’t in her makeup. At least, it never had been before.

“I take it you’ve been interviewed by Ms. Donovan before,” Jaxon said, cutting into her thoughts.

Nadia rolled her eyes. “Not hardly.” At the strange look he gave her she decided to explain. “Although *Good Morning Wyoming* started off as a one-hour show to keep the viewers abreast of the things going on in the four communities it serves, a couple of years ago the producers switched gears.”

“Switched gears how?”

“They switched their focus to celebrities who visited the area to ski and hang out in and around Jackson Hole. Would you believe Ms. Donovan turned me down each and every time I called to ask for time on her show?”

“That’s a missed opportunity for her,” Jaxon said, shaking his head as he moved the car forward when the traffic light changed. “I hear you’re doing great things at the academy.”

She figured Pam told him that but decided to ask him anyway. “You heard that from who?”

“The mayor and some others.”

That made her feel good. “I’m convinced the only reason I got an invite to

the show was because of you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. It would make more sense to show what your company is doing to help the community by hearing from the first recipient of your company’s kindness.”

He didn’t say anything, and she figured he’d agreed with what she’d stated. “We’re here,” he said. When Jaxon brought the car to a stop he glanced at his watch. “We’re almost an hour early.”

She nodded. “It’s better to be early than late.” Then after a moment she said, “I want to thank you, Jaxon.”

“No problem since I was coming this way.”

“No, I want to thank you for everything. For replacing the Dunnings Financial Group as the play’s sponsor. Although the students had faith in me to find a replacement. Unfortunately, they were wrong.”

Nadia watched as he eased the car seat back to give himself more room to stretch out his legs. “No, they weren’t wrong. You got a replacement.”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t. Miraculously, you came to me.”

He shrugged. “Does it matter?”

Yes, it mattered to her that this tall, ultrahandsome, broad-shouldered, sexy-as all-outdoors man helped her save face with not only the students but everyone involved in the play, including the community, which looked forward to seeing the performance every year. It was a time when the residents came together to support a good cause.

“It does to me.”

He nodded. “Then I’m glad my company could help.”

She didn’t say anything. He hadn’t said he was glad that he could help but that *his company* could help. Was that his way of reminding her that she’d made it pretty clear she didn’t want any type of relationship between them? She’d made a shambles of things with Jaxon, and she knew it was up to her to undo the mess she’d made.

* * *

Sue Ellen Donovan was smiling into the camera. “Today our guests on the show are Jaxon Ravel, CEO of Ravel Technologies, along with Miss Nadia Novak, the VP of Development and Community Civic Engagement for the Dream Makers Acting Academy in Gamble.”

Jaxon watched the camera switch from Ms. Donovan to zero in on him before shifting to Nadia. He saw how strikingly beautiful she was on camera. As far as he was concerned Sue Ellen Donovan's introduction of him took way too long. By the time it was finished everyone knew more about his family and their wealth than they needed to. She also harped on the fact he was single and a prime catch. He thought the statement was inappropriate and was tempted to say he was officially off the market because the woman he wanted to marry was sitting on stage beside him.

"Thank you two for coming and sharing information with our viewing audience," Sue Ellen Donovan said, reclaiming his attention. "First, I want to begin with you, Mr. Ravel. I'm aware of your company's decision to expand in Texas as well as Wyoming. What made you choose Gamble?"

Of course he'd been expecting that question and provided the same answer he'd given others who'd asked. After instituting a plan for growth, it became a business decision to expand in other states. Mainly as a way to improve and further develop products and services.

Sue Ellen Donovan continued to ask questions so that his responses could fully explain the benefits in communities when big businesses made such a move.

She then turned her attention to Nadia. However, she only asked one question before moving her attention back to him. Then the woman's questions began centering on his private life, which annoyed the hell out of Jaxon. It became obvious that she was turning this into some sort of celebrity interview.

He saw the disappointment in Nadia's eyes. After he finished answering the last question Sue Ellen had asked, and she was about to ask him another, a rebellious Nadia spoke up and said, "I think it would be wonderful to tell the audience about the play the academy is producing."

Before the woman could say whether it would be wonderful or not, Jaxon agreed. "I think that is a great idea, Ms. Novak. After all, the purpose of this interview was to highlight what my company will be doing in the community and not focus on my personal life." He then turned to Sue Ellen Donovan. "Isn't that right?"

A chagrined expression appeared on the woman's face. "Yes, of course."

Nadia began speaking and Jaxon took in the richness of her voice as she explained things in a way that would get viewers excited about the event. She went into detail about how an acclaimed director from Hollywood had

volunteered to direct the show. From Sue Ellen Donovan's expression it was obvious she hadn't known that.

He chimed in on occasion and told everyone how excited his company was to partner with the school as sponsor, and he shared the names of other charities his company was looking into sponsoring in the near future. At the end he mentioned his company would be setting up a job fair because he wanted to hire as many qualified individuals in the area as possible, in addition to relocating some of his own people.

Sue Ellen opened the network call lines and some of the viewers had questions about Jaxon's company, as well as the school's play. Some callers even made comments that it was great hearing about something else other than movie stars and they hoped the television station did more such shows. Jaxon hoped the producers took that under consideration.

At the end of the show the production assistant rushed on stage to remove the mics off their clothes. That's when Sue Ellen invited Jaxon to lunch. It didn't go past him that she didn't extend the invitation to Nadia.

"Thanks, but Ms. Novak and I have made plans for lunch before returning to Gamble."

"Oh."

"I want to thank you for finally having me on your show," Nadia said, giving Sue Ellen a smile that even Jaxon could tell didn't quite reach her eyes.

Sue Ellen nodded, pulling a business card out of her jacket. Handing it to Jaxon, she said, "I would love for you to call me sometime. I'll be glad to tell you more about the area and even show you around."

He took the card more out of courtesy than anything else. "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind," he said, although he had no plans to do so. He then turned to Nadia. "Are you ready to go, Ms. Novak?"

She nodded. "Yes, Mr. Ravel. I'm ready."

When they were buckled inside the car, he glanced over at Nadia before starting the engine. "Where do you want to go for lunch? You're more familiar with the area than I am."

She gave him a smile that had his stomach churning with sexual need. "There's a great bar and grill in the next town. It's owned by friends of mine and the food is great."

"That sounds good," he said, putting on his aviator-style sunglasses. Although it was chilly outside, the bright sun was shining over the

mountains.

He glanced over at her. “Are you in a hurry to return to Gamble?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“There are several stops I need to make before we head back.” The truth of the matter was that he was in no hurry to get her back home.

“No problem. I’ll call and let China know I’m taking the rest of the day off. I need time off anyway. It’s been a while since I’ve taken any.”

Now that he knew that bit of information, he was going to make sure she enjoyed today with him.

Twelve

After leaving the television station they had lunch at Gravel, a bar and grill owned by a college friend of Nadia's named Lilli. For years Lilli's parents had run the place and had recently turned it over to Lilli when they retired.

Jaxon placed his hand in the center of her back while they walked into the restaurant. His touch had an effect on her. All sorts of feelings rippled through her, and she was totally conscious of him as a man. And from the feminine looks they got when they entered, quite a few other women were aware of him as well.

She could tell Jaxon liked Lilli when they were introduced. Most people did. She had that kind of personality. He also liked Aaron, Lilli's husband. Since Aaron was originally from Norfolk, Virginia, the two had a lot to talk about, being from the same state.

Lilli had been Nadia's friend long enough to detect something between her and Jaxon, although she'd introduced him as a business associate. Had Nadia's interest in him been obvious? She discovered her answer when, after placing her order, she excused herself to go to the bathroom and deliberately cornered Lilli. "What gives, Lil?"

Lilli threw her head back and laughed. "You tell me, girlfriend. I can't wait until I talk to Rissa. Business associate, my ass. The sexual chemistry between you and Jaxon Ravel is so thick I can feel it."

"It's not," Nadia scoffed.

"It is, too. I'm sure even Aaron felt it and he has a tendency to let stuff go over his head. Another thing I noticed is that Jaxon can't keep his eyes off you, so the desire isn't just coming from you, kiddo."

She hoped not. Otherwise, she'd been reading the vibes all wrong. But then she didn't have that much experience with men to read the signs Rissa had told her to look out for. She was well aware of the fire raging inside her whenever he glanced her way, gave her a smile or when he'd placed his hand at the center of her back. Returning to her table, she tried to stay composed but it was hard. Never had she been this taken with a man. Jaxon had the ability to short-circuit her senses.

She'd ordered a hamburger, fries and a strawberry milkshake. He had a brisket sandwich with sweet potato fries and a vanilla shake. Over lunch he told her how he'd recently gone into partnership with the Westmorelands' horse-training business. She had heard that from Paige but enjoyed listening to him tell her about it. She sat there trying to convince herself her enjoyment had nothing to do with the deep, husky sound of his voice. Nor did it have anything to do with how sensuous his mouth looked whenever it moved.

"How did your parents meet?" she asked, curious about the two people who'd raised him. She'd heard from Paige, who'd met them, that his mother was gorgeous and the epitome of a defined and elegant woman. She probably had more sophistication in her pinkie finger than Nadia had in her entire body.

He smiled at her question, and she immediately felt a quivering in the pit of her stomach. "Mom and Dad were the two most unlikely people to get together. He needed more land to expand the institute and she was president of this group whose sole purpose was to protect lands and natural resources from excessive development. Needless to say, they butted heads."

"I can imagine."

"I don't think you can. I still find it hard to believe at times. I understand back in the day Dad was a rather stern businessman who was used to having things his way. Mom was a tough cookie. At the time Dad was the most eligible bachelor in town and was known to dazzle most women."

Probably like his son, she thought. "So how did they come to a compromise?"

"I don't think they did. At the time she was a college professor at a community college in Dumfries. He thought she was the most temperamental, unmanageable, outspoken and sassy woman he'd ever met."

Nadia laughed. "She sounds like a woman I can truly admire."

"She was one he could admire, too. Dad says he fell in love with Mom the moment he walked into her office to give her hell. He was immediately taken with her because she was the first woman who didn't treat him like he was a prize catch. Instead, she treated him like he was a nuisance she was forced to deal with." He took a sip of his iced tea and then said, "Needless to say, less than a year after they met they got married."

Nadia nodded. "What was the outcome of the land your father wanted but she didn't want him to have?"

"Since the primary concern of her organization was the trees on the

property that had been there for over one hundred years, Dad promised to build around them. Although that meant having the architectural plans redone, which was costly.”

A short while later, after they'd eaten, Jaxon told her how much he'd enjoyed his meal. To her surprise, when they were leaving, he told Lilli and Aaron he would be coming back.

When they left Gravel, he reminded Nadia of the errands he had to make in Jackson Hole. They went to several men's shops looking for shirts and ties. He also purchased another Stetson. Last was a pair of boots. At first it felt odd going shopping with him but after a while it seemed like a natural act. He asked her opinion about several ties and bought the ones she told him she liked the best.

By the time they'd finished with all his shopping it was close to five o'clock and he suggested they grab dinner. They dined at a very elegant restaurant in Jackson Hole. The moment she walked into the Jagged Edge she recalled hearing about it from Cash Outlaw's wife, Brianna. This was where Cash had brought her for their wedding dinner. It was just as beautiful as Brianna had said. The restaurant was massive as well as impressive with a set of triple stairs that led to other dining areas, high cathedral ceilings and beautiful chandeliers.

Dinner had been delicious and instead of discussing anything personal, she'd asked him about what he'd said during Sue Ellen Donovan's interview. Specifically, those community projects he was adding to his agenda for next year. One conversation led to another and he shared with her his plans for his company. With the acquired land in Wyoming, he was finished expanding for now. His concentration would be on hiring the most qualified people to manage both the Forbes and Gamble expansions.

“I hadn't meant to keep you away so long,” he said when they were headed back to Gamble. They had enjoyed conversing so much that neither of them had realized how late it had gotten. It was close to eight o'clock.

“That's fine. I enjoyed taking a day off work.” And she truly meant it. What she hadn't added was that she had enjoyed spending the time with him.

“What in the world!”

She heard the startled astonishment in his voice, and then he pulled the car over to the shoulder of the road. She followed his gaze as he stared out the window and into the sky. She saw what had him so captivated. The Milky Way could occasionally be seen in this part of Wyoming.

It was known that the state of Wyoming was one of the only states in the country where an individual could enjoy the beauty of the universe. Over the years she'd seen planets, nebulae, a multitude of stars and galaxies. It was the best place for stargazing and most people around these parts owned telescopes. Tonight, you didn't need one. The sight before them was a spectacular view with clarity.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful."

She nodded, understanding completely. That was usually a person's reaction upon seeing the Milky Way for the first time. "On those nights when the skies were really dark, Dad and Mom used to gather us up in our pjs and drive us to Peake Row. It's the best place around here to see the Milky Way."

"Peake Row? I'd love to go there. And I'd love for you to go with me. You can even wear your pj's."

She turned to look at him and could see the seriousness in his gaze. He wasn't teasing. Clearing her throat, she said, "Thanks for the invite, but I'll pass."

She glanced back into the sky when suddenly a mass of red seemed to circle around the stars in the shape of an arrow. "My goodness!" Now she was the one with startled astonishment in her voice.

"What is it?" he asked, staring up into the sky and seeing the same thing that she did.

"That rarely appears, what looks like a huge ball of fire encircling a cluster of stars. It's beautiful."

"It is. Have you ever seen it before?"

"No." There was no need to tell him that around these parts there were some who believed if a couple saw it together, it was a sure sign of everlasting love. She was glad she wasn't one of those believers.

When the sky began getting dark again, he said, "I guess the show is over."

"Yes, I guess it is. It was beautiful while it lasted though."

An hour later they were pulling up in her yard. The floodlights from the house shone into the car and highlighted his features. "It's late but at least I got you back safe and sound."

"And I appreciate it," she said, flashing him a smile.

"I enjoyed your company," he said, opening his door to get out.

She watched him come around to her side of the car to open the door and wondered if he'd felt the sexual chemistry between them that she'd been feeling all day. She'd spent the entire day with him and had enjoyed it. When

they reached her front door, she thanked him for the ride into Valley Bluff.

“Don’t mention it. Are you sure you have a way to pick up your car tomorrow?”

“Yes. Rissa will be taking me. Like I told you, Steve’s Auto Repair Shop is open all day on Saturdays.”

“Okay. Flick the blinds when you get inside to let me know you’re safe.”

Nadia nodded, a little disappointed he hadn’t asked to come inside. Would he kiss her goodbye? He was standing close but not too close. “I will. Thanks. Good night.”

“Good night, Nadia.”

Her key was in her hand and she turned to her front door. She heard his footsteps moving down the stairs and when she opened the door to go inside, she turned to look over her shoulder, certain he’d made it to his car by now. He hadn’t. Instead, he stood on the last step. Their gazes met and held.

She was going to ask if anything was wrong, but couldn’t. It was as if she was in a trance where her vocal cords weren’t working. Nadia swallowed as she slowly turned back around to face him. She felt the pull, the connection, and all that chemistry Lilli had teased her about earlier that day. She also felt something else she couldn’t explain.

Time appeared to drone on endlessly before he spoke in a low, deep voice. “You’re killing me, Nadia.”

She was killing him? Did he not know what he was doing to her?

“How?” she heard herself asking.

“Do you not feel it? All that chemistry? Have you not felt it all day?”

No need for her to play dumb. They were both adults after all. “Yes, I feel it and yes, I’ve felt it all day.”

From his expression it was obvious her response had surprised him. He slowly began walking back to her. When he came to a stop in front of her, he asked, “Do you want to go inside and talk about it?”

Nadia nibbled nervously on her bottom lip. Was that what she wanted? Or did she want something more? Although she didn’t believe seeing that sign in the sky had anything to do with love, maybe it was the universe’s way of letting her know it was time to make one important move in her life. And if that was true, then why not make that move with him?

Wasn’t that the advice Rissa had given her? To invite him in? The chemistry between them was hot and there was no doubt in her mind he had the ability to rock her world. But more than anything, she believed that unlike

Benson, he wasn't the type of man who would break a woman's heart without caring that it might cause her pain.

"Nadia?"

Making her decision, she said, "No. I don't want to go inside and talk about it, Jaxon. I want to go inside and do something about it."

* * *

Jaxon followed Nadia inside and closed the door behind them. After she strolled to the living room, she kicked off her shoes. The heels weren't high enough to be considered stilettos, but had looked sexy on her legs nonetheless. His gaze focused entirely on her as she removed her jacket and began unbuttoning her blouse. "Don't you think we need to talk first?" he asked.

"No." She slanted him a cool yet decisive look. Determined. "But we do need to get the status of our relationship squared."

He watched as she finished unbuttoning her blouse. It hung open, revealing a sexy black lace bra. "Squared in what way, Nadia?"

"You said if I wanted to change the status of our relationship you'd grant me the courtesy of doing so."

He lifted a brow. "And are you doing so?"

"Yes. I want more than an acquaintanceship or a business relationship between us. At least for tonight anyway."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

If she thought this would be a single sexual encounter, a once-in-a-lifetime-thing for them, she was wrong. He'd engaged in casual sex before but he wouldn't do so with her. Never with her. Regardless of whether she accepted it or not, she was the woman who would be his future wife. Once they made love there was no turning back.

He slowly crossed the floor to stand in front of her. "So what do you want from me, Nadia?"

In her bare feet, she took a step closer and he immediately breathed in her scent. The same scent that had captivated him during the drive all day. The same scent that could send desire rippling through him whenever it flowed through his nostrils.

Jaxon took a sharp breath when she deliberately pressed her body against

his. There was no way she couldn't tell he was aroused. Every cell in his body throbbed due to overloaded testosterone. Maybe he should warn her just how long it had been since he'd been with a woman. Not since meeting her more than a year ago and wanting her to be the only woman he made love to for the rest of his life. That meant his entire body was in a sexually deprived state.

She then leaned toward him, where their mouths were almost touching, and whispered, "I want one steamy night, Jaxon. I've never had one before, and I want you to give me one."

She'd never had one before? Questions flared in his mind. Was she saying no man had ever given her a night to remember? The Big O? Satisfied her to the degree she had expected? Or was she stating something else altogether? That she'd never...

The thought that suddenly entered his mind was way too much to imagine as a possibility. After all, she was twenty-eight. Then he stopped thinking at all when she leaned in closer and used the tip of her tongue to swipe across his lips.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her toward him and kissed her long, hard and deep. She wanted a steamy night and he intended to give her one.

* * *

Nadia sighed deep in her throat. Jaxon was giving her a kiss that topped any kiss she'd ever shared. It was a kiss that even made the first one they'd shared weeks ago seem tame in comparison.

He released her mouth to give her a moment to draw in a much needed breath before capturing her mouth again. The feel of his tongue dueling with hers stimulated her in a way she'd never been stimulated before. Tonight his mouth was greedier, more demanding.

Suddenly she pulled back, breaking off the kiss, parting her lips to draw in another deep breath, her gaze focused solely on him. She kept her gaze on Jaxon while licking her lips. Never had a man tasted so delicious. He stood there with his arms wrapped around her, giving her time to...do what? Slow down the rapid beating of her heart? The urgent throb between her legs? His gaze was as intently focused on her as hers was on him.

"You have beautiful lips, Nadia."

His words made her swipe her tongue across them, and she saw how his gaze followed the movement. “I think you have beautiful lips, too.” She wasn’t good at small talk. But then she wasn’t good at flirting either.

In a surprise move, he slid his hands beneath her blouse to caress her back. It was the same spot he’d placed his hand several times today but now he was touching her skin. The moment he did so, something flared in his eyes and heat filled her completely.

Then, in an unexpected move, he swept her off her feet and into his arms. “Which way?”

“Upstairs. First bedroom on your right.”

How he managed to maneuver the stairs while holding her firmly in his arms, she wasn’t sure. But he did. After placing her on the bed, he leaned in and kissed her again. A jolt of sexual energy rushed through her body when their tongues began devouring each other.

When he finally released her mouth, he straightened and stared down at her. More heat than she could ever have imagined suffused her. She could only lie there, propped against her pillow, and stare back. No man had ever made her feel this way from a kiss. Desire was actually clawing at her and each breath she took caught on a surge of yearning so sharp it felt painful.

“I don’t think you have any idea how much I want you, Nadia.”

She had news for him. She doubted he knew how much she wanted him, too. Arousal coiled in the very core of her. She’d never considered herself an overly sexual being. Until him. Not in a million years would she have asked any man to give her one steamy night. However, she had done so with him.

“What’s going on in that pretty little head of yours, Nadia? You aren’t changing your mind about tonight, are you?”

She was surprised he’d asked. Most men would not have. They would have taken the ball she’d placed in their court and played it without caring that she might be having doubts. “No, I’m not changing my mind.”

He nodded and the serious expression on his face eased into a smile. “In that case, whose clothes come off first? Yours or mine?”

Knowing her answer would seal her fate, a fate she was looking forward to, she said, “Yours. More than anything I want to undress you, Jaxon.”

Thirteen

Nadia's words did something to him. They fired up his libido even more. Undressing him was just one of the things he wanted her to do to him. "Then come undress me."

His heart kicked up a notch and his erection pressed hard against the zipper of his pants when she eased off the bed and slowly walked over to him. He couldn't help noticing just how uneven her breath was with every step she took. From the first, he'd thought her to be sexy as hell. That hadn't changed. Although after tonight her place in his life still might be unclear to her, at least it would be a start.

And speaking of a start...she looked unsure about where and how to begin. Those earlier thoughts he'd had regarding her experience level returned. But then it honestly didn't matter. He would gladly introduce her to everything any other man had fallen short in doing.

He stared down at her and she stared up at him. Her beautiful chocolate-brown eyes held a level of innocence he hadn't expected. Then, as if the look in his eyes motivated her, she pushed the jacket from his shoulders and began unbuttoning his shirt. His heart rate increased with every button she touched. Moments later, when she eased his shirt from his trousers and it hung open, she seemed transfixed with his chest.

"I love a man with a hairy chest, Jaxon."

He was glad to hear that. "What else do you love about a man?"

She switched her eyes from his chest to his face. "I love a man who cares enough about his health to stay in shape. You have nice abs as well."

He chuckled at that. "Thanks. I think you have nice abs, too."

She lifted a brow. "You've never seen my abs."

"Yes, I have."

"When?"

That wasn't hard for him to recall. "The weekend I was in Westmoreland Country for Bane's second set of triplets' first birthday. You were getting out of their swimming pool." The image of her in that two-piece bikini had permanently fried his brain. She had looked just that hot. "You looked sexy

as hell.”

“You liked what you saw, did you?” she asked, tracing a slow path up and down his chest.

He couldn’t stop the sharp breath that escaped his lips. “I most certainly did. I liked it a lot.”

She tilted her head and looked at him questioningly. “Yet you never showed any sign of interest.”

Since he’d promised not to mention marriage again, he wouldn’t tell her that he’d decided the day they’d been introduced that she would be his wife. “The interest was there, Nadia. I’m just not a man who likes rushing into anything. That’s not my style.”

Nadia didn’t say anything to that. Instead, she lifted her hands to push his shirt off his shoulders. Then she lowered her hands to his belt, but not before again tracing a path through the hair on his chest. She’d obviously been serious when she said she liked a hairy chest.

Jaxon was trying hard to keep his control in check when she unbuckled his belt and eased it from the loops. He almost stopped breathing when her hands went to his zipper to slide it down. Because of his erection, her doing so wasn’t an easy task. He glanced down and watched her, saw the determined look on her face and hoped like hell she didn’t ask him to suck it in. There was no way he could.

When she’d finally slid the zipper all the way down, she looked up at him and met his gaze with a huge smile of accomplishment on her face.

“Now what?” he asked, thinking just how much he loved her.

“Your shoes and socks have to go before I can tackle your pants and briefs.”

“Okay,” he said, thinking he definitely didn’t have a problem with her tackling anything when it came to him.

Easing down on the bed, he removed his shoes and socks as she watched him intently. When he stood back up, she was there, reaching out her hand for the waistband of his slacks. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this,” she said softly, “but I like how you dress. With your suits. Makes you stand out as the businessman that you are.”

He chuckled. “You mean you don’t prefer seeing me in jeans and a Western shirt?”

She glanced up at him. “I’ve seen you dressed that way in Westmoreland Country, and I liked it, too. But there is something about you in a suit and

Stetson. Especially when you don't wear a tie. I like the open-shirt look."

She would say that after he'd purchased three new ties that day. "Because of the hairy chest?"

She smiled. "Precisely."

He wondered if Nadia realized she was giving him too much information. However, he had no intention of telling her that, but he would file it in the back of his mind for future use.

Jaxon ceased thinking when she eased his slacks down his hips and legs and stooped to assist while he stepped out of them. When she stood back up, she stared at his middle. He was in a pair of black briefs and the size of his erection couldn't be helped. He wanted her just that much.

"Now for that last piece," she said in a somewhat nervous tone. The last thing he wanted was for her to get cold feet now.

"I'm all yours, Nadia." He meant that more than she would ever know.

She glanced up at his face from staring at his groin and then took a step toward him. He watched with bated breath as she eased down the last piece of his clothing.

For the longest time she stared down at his aroused shaft. It was as if she was seeing a man—up close and personal—for the first time. That niggling thought he'd forced to the back of his mind earlier tried to make its way to the forefront yet again. He pushed it back.

Then as if she pulled herself out of a trance, she shifted her gaze to other parts of him. With a huge smile on her face, she met his gaze and said, "Well, I guess I'm finished."

He smiled back and said, "Not quite."

* * *

Not quite? Nadia figured a dumbfounded look had to be on her face. Finding her voice, she decided to ask. "What else is there?"

Instead of answering, he leaned down and picked up his slacks to pull something out of one of the pockets. He opened his hand to show her what he had. Condom packets. Several of them. "Oh."

"You want to do the honors, Nadia?"

She arched a brow. He had to be kidding. Although she was sure some women might not have a problem doing such a thing, she did. She wouldn't know where to start. And the thought of holding him in her hand while

figuring out a condom was too much to think about. Even now his erection jutted proudly from a dark thatch of hair. Why did the sight of it make her want to reach out and run her fingers through those curls?

“Nadia?”

She raised her gaze to him. He was waiting for her response. “Thanks, but I’ll let you do it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

He nodded and she stood there and watched him. When he finished, he glanced back at her. “Now it’s my turn.”

Nadia swallowed. She had gotten so caught up in watching him sheath himself that she couldn’t comprehend his words. “Your turn?”

“Yes. It’s my turn to undress you.”

Not wasting any time, he pushed her blouse from her shoulders. Then he unhooked the front clasp of her bra, which made her breasts spill out. “Your breasts are beautiful. So damn shapely,” he said, staring at them.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say they were also real. “Glad you like them.”

“I’m going to prove just how much I like them in a moment. There aren’t any limitations tonight, right?”

She blinked at his question. “Limitations?”

“Yes. You want steamy and I want to make tonight as steamy for you as it can get.”

His words had heat gathering in the area between her legs. “There are no limitations, Jaxon.”

“Good.”

He finished undressing her by removing her skirt. Crouching down in front of her, he lowered her black lace panties down her legs and then remained there to stare at her feminine mound. It was as if he was fascinated by it, and she knew why. Although she wasn’t sexually active, she wanted to look pretty down there regardless. That was why she routinely got a French bikini wax with a little artwork thrown in. The curls left down there were in the shape of a heart.

“That design is beautiful,” he said, standing back on his feet.

“Thanks.”

“And just so you know, Nadia, tonight will be a night of pleasure for the both of us. Especially for you.”

She tilted her head to look up at him. Did he know about her virginity?
“Why especially for me?”

“Because you deserve a man cherishing your body while making love to it.”

His words touched Nadia. Her first time with a man was playing out how she'd hoped, how she'd fantasized it could be. She'd always wanted her first to be someone who wouldn't rush things. Someone who'd want to pleasure her, and Jaxon just said he would.

Her breath took on a different pattern when Jaxon's gaze moved from her eyes down her naked body—head to toe—before returning to the juncture of her thighs.

Feeling emboldened, she took a couple of steps to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. Doing so made them skin-to-skin, hard to soft.

She whispered, “I'm ready for the Jaxon Ravel experience.”

Fourteen

The Jaxon Ravel experience?

No woman had ever termed making love with him that way, Jaxon thought. Coming from Nadia, he would take it. Not only would he take it, but he would try like hell to make it an experience she would never forget. It took more than great sex to bind a woman to a man and vice versa, but at least it was an explosive connection.

Sweeping her into his arms he carried her over to the bed. By the end of the night, she would be his physically. He would continue to work on her mentally by having them get to know each other more, showing her how good they could be together and making sure she fully understood the impact she had on his heart and the place he had designed for her in his life.

After placing her on the bed, he joined her there. Pulling her into his arms, he zeroed in on her mouth for a kiss. More than anything, he wanted to not only give Nadia intense pleasure, but he also wanted them to savor the night so she'd want plenty of steamy nights with him. The kiss was long, deep and passionate. It fired up everything inside of him and, from the sound of her moans, it fired her up as well.

Simultaneously, his hands were all over her. His fingers touched areas on her body he intended to give his full concentration to later. Right now, his focus was on her mouth and her taste. From their first kiss he'd found her flavor addictive and mind-blowingly delicious. He could kiss her all day or every chance he got. Holding back and not kissing her good-night when he'd brought her home after dinner on his jet had been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do.

Finally, he broke off the kiss and stared down at her. Her lips glistened, and he lowered his head to lick the wetness from them with the tip of his tongue. After licking and nibbling around her mouth a while, he licked toward her neck. From there he licked his way to her breasts and took a swollen peak into his mouth. He heard a whimper escape her lips as he sucked harder. Like he'd told her, she had beautiful breasts. They were the perfect size and shape. When he'd removed her bra to reveal them, sensations

ripped through him. It had taken everything he had to hold himself in check. He'd never considered himself a breast man. Of course he liked looking at them and sampling them on occasion. But he'd never wanted to gobble up a pair like he was doing to Nadia.

Then he eased his finger between her legs. He began to shamelessly stroke her there while he devoured her breasts. Her feminine scent got to him, arousing him in a way he hadn't thought possible. It was then that he knew it was time to go further south. Shifting his body, he pulled away from her breasts and moved down to her stomach, licking and nibbling. Her skin was soft, delicate beneath his tongue, and the taste was incredible. He figured if her skin tasted this awesome, he could just imagine how tasty the area between her legs would be.

“Jaxon...”

Although her thighs opened when he'd placed his head between them, the way she'd said his name made him think no other man had gone down on her before. He glanced up and saw how she was looking at him with a mixture of want, need and curiosity. He knew then he would take his time, feast on her properly, to ensure this part of lovemaking was something she enjoyed.

He lowered his head and went to work. Grabbing hold of her hips, he eased his tongue inside of her. He loved the moan she made; he'd made one as well. She was so damn delicious. Her delectable flavor seemed to send his tongue into a licking frenzy. Locking his mouth to her feminine mound while holding her hips tight, he began devouring her. She grabbed his head to hold him to her. Such a thing wasn't needed since he had no intention of going anywhere. Never had his tongue been so eager to satisfy a woman.

He knew from the sudden jerking of her body that she was climaxing, but he refused to pull his mouth away. He kept it there while his tongue enjoyed the taste of her feminine juices. They invigorated him, filled him with a craving the extent of which he'd never felt for a woman. After lapping up as much of her as he could, he pulled his mouth away and looked up at her.

The satisfaction on her face touched him, sent sensuous shivers all through his body. She had enjoyed it as much as he had, and he was glad. Now it was time for the union of not only their bodies, but also their minds and souls.

Taking a deep breath, which included a whiff of her scent, he moved to ease his body over hers. While holding her gaze firmly with his, he slowly entered her. He knew the moment his earlier suspicions were confirmed. He was going where no man had gone before.

He was humbled and honored to be Nadia's first. Although she might not know it or accept it, she belonged to him in every way a woman could belong to a man. At twenty-eight he wasn't sure why she'd waited but she had and he would be the lucky guy. The only guy.

Their gazes held and as he stared into her eyes, he felt the same degree of desire he'd felt when he'd first met her, the same desire he felt whenever he was close to her. Now they were as close as two people could possibly be. All he could do was stare down into her beautiful face. With her hair spread out across the pillows, her features were even more striking. If it was possible to fall in love with her even more, at that moment he did.

He moved again and she widened her legs as if to welcome him in. When he had pushed his way inside her to the hilt, he asked, "You're okay?"

Reaching up, she wrapped her arms around his neck. She smiled and said, "Yes, I'm okay."

"Good, because I'm about to give you the ride of your life, sweetheart."

And he meant it.

* * *

Something inside of Nadia flared to life when Jaxon began thrusting. And when he growled low in his throat, every hormone inside of her sizzled as if she was burning alive from the inside out. She felt it in every pore, nerve and pulse. And then there was the sound of flesh slapping against flesh and the way his gaze held hers as if daring her to look away. She couldn't.

He managed to go deeper and deeper and she wondered how her body was keeping up with his urgent demands. She'd begun moving her body as well; she couldn't help but respond. Her body throbbed in areas it never had before.

Then there was the feel of his pubic hair rubbing against hers. It seemed everything surrounding them was on overload. His manly scent seemed to envelop her and when he leaned in to nibble on her earlobe, the feel of his hot breath near her neck made her heart skip a beat.

Each time he made a downward thrust, her feminine muscles tightened and tried holding him in while her hands glided up and down his naked back. Was this what made her sisters wear such satisfied smiles whenever they talked about their husbands' abilities in the bedroom? Now she fully understood what she'd been missing by not doing this with a man. But a part of her knew

that it might not have been this good, this overwhelming, this hot with any other man but Jaxon. For reasons she didn't understand, they connected on every level.

Suddenly, he moved his mouth from her ear to her lips at the same time he used his hands to lift her hips to a more secure fit while moving inside of her. This kiss was hotter than any they'd ever shared. It was a full contact, wet-tongue kiss that made her head reel and her senses spin. And when his tongue captured hers, she clamped his face with her hands while returning the kiss with the same hunger and need he was plowing into it.

Then she felt it. It was as if every roll of his hips, every hard thrust into her body and the mind-blowing kiss had prepared her for this. It felt like a sexual explosion tearing her body apart with pleasure. She pulled her mouth from his and let out a scream as she felt her body splinter into a thousand pieces. Each piece filled with frissons of fire and passion.

Then she heard him holler out her name at the same time his body jerked hard while he continued to pound inside her, hard and deep. That pushed her into another orgasm. She welcomed it, needed it and desperately wanted it. She clenched her inner muscles around him tighter and knew he was giving her all he had. Yet she wanted more. Arching her back, her inner muscles clamped down on him, trying to draw everything out of him. She was determined to receive it all.

And just like she wanted, it happened for the third time. And she screamed yet again.

* * *

“Nadia?”

She forced open her eyes, feeling drained and depleted of all strength. Meeting Jaxon's gaze she forced a single word from her lungs. “Yes?”

“I need to go into the bathroom and come back to take care of you.”

“Take care of me, how?”

“Last night was your first time and if I don't put you in a tub of warm water, you're going to be sore tomorrow.”

She was glad that once he'd discovered she was a virgin he hadn't stopped making love to her. “I'm not ready to move just yet. Besides, I won't be too sore. I ride a lot.”

He chuckled and tenderly kissed her lips. “Yes, sweetheart, but tonight you

weren't the one doing the riding."

That was true but as far as she was concerned, it didn't matter. She wasn't ready for their bodies to separate, which was why her legs had a firm grip across his back. He couldn't go anywhere until she released him. "I liked it and want to do it again."

Seeing those lips she loved ease into a smile made her pulse rate increase. "I don't suggest we do that."

"Why?"

"It might make you even sorer."

"I'll chance a little discomfort for another few rounds."

He lifted a brow. "Another few rounds?"

"Yes. Now that I have you where I want you, I'm not ready to let you go." Too late she realized what she'd said and knew how her words could be misconstrued. She quickly added, "What I meant is that this is all new to me and I wondered how it would be. Now that I know and I like it, I'm wondering what took me so long to try it."

"Not that I'm complaining, but what did take you so long?" he asked, nuzzling his lips near her earlobes again.

Since he'd been her first, a position most men didn't want, and he hadn't made a fuss about it, she did owe him some sort of explanation. "I'll tell you, but not tonight. I want you again, Jaxon."

He stared down at her and she could feel him expanding inside of her. "I need to change condoms."

She knew he probably should, especially after hearing how Maverick had gotten Phire pregnant. But still. "Maybe the next go-round. I'm not ready for you to come out of me yet. Just so you know I am on the pill and I'm safe."

He stared at her and then said, "I'm safe as well."

A smile touched her lips. "Then there's no reason for us to worry about a condom, is there?"

He pushed back a lock of hair that had fallen in her face. "You sure?"

"I'm positive." Tonight in his arms, while he was here in her bed, she felt feminine and safe. She also felt desired. His aroused body attested to that. Then there was that hum of lust that had infiltrated her brain, making her want more of him. She wanted to know how it felt for him to release his semen inside of her. Tonight, he had introduced her to something her body had never done before and she had enjoyed it immensely. Maybe a little too much. She would have to worry about that later.

She had asked for one steamy night and she was definitely getting it.

Fifteen

Jaxon came awake to the brightness of the sun coming in through the window and the sound of Nadia's even breathing. She was still sleeping while cuddled in his arms. He could definitely get used to waking up each morning this way. He couldn't imagine anything better than being in bed with the woman he loved, holding her close after a night of lovemaking.

He hoped like hell she'd be able to walk today but she'd gotten just what she'd asked for. He'd given her fair warning. However, she'd refused to take heed. He had removed the condom after their first lovemaking session but hadn't put another one on. The feel of being skin to skin with her had driven his own need to have her over and over again. Each and every time their bodies joined, he'd loved her that much more. It had been before dawn this morning when they'd finally drifted off to sleep wrapped in each other's arms.

As he lay there staring up at the ceiling he wondered what today would bring. Would she regret what happened last night? Ask him to leave? Assume last night was one and done? Had last night been only about lust for her? That meant it was up to him to show her the difference between lust and love. She might not love him now, but there was no reason for her not to love him eventually. He would have enough love for the two of them until she did. In time she would see that their lives were entwined, and he would never hurt her.

There was a knock at her front door. He glanced at the clock on her wall and wondered who would be paying her a visit before nine in the morning? Hell, it would be just his luck for one of those Westmorelands or Outlaws to be here. She'd said they were known to drop in unannounced.

When the knock sounded again, she stirred in his arms and then slowly opened her eyes. He knew the exact moment she brought him into focus. He tried to prepare himself for what was to come. She hadn't asked him to spend the night; it just happened that way. He wondered if she'd remember how many times her legs had held his body hostage.

She continued to stare at him as if trying to recall why he was there. Then

it seemed as if she remembered and the recollection made her smile. He released a relieved breath. “Good morning, Nadia.”

“Good morning to you, Jaxon.”

She sounded like she was in a good mood and then she proved she was by leaning over and brushing her lips across his. Before she could move back, he took over the kiss, deciding to show her what a real good-morning kiss looked like. He captured her mouth and exploited it for all it was worth and for him, it was worth everything.

The knock at the door sounded again. Louder this time. Jaxon reluctantly pulled his mouth away from hers. However, out of necessity, he licked around her lips and asked, “Do you normally get visitors this early?”

She licked around his mouth as well. “It’s probably Rissa. She was supposed to take me to pick up my car this morning. I should have called her. Since you’re here you can take me. At least if you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t mind.”

“She’s probably seen your car and figures you’re still here since I’d told her I would be catching a ride with you to the television station yesterday.”

He nodded. “Do you have a problem with her knowing I spent the night?”

“Heck no.” She eased out of bed. “I would call and tell her to go away but my cell phone is downstairs.” It didn’t seem to bother her that she was standing there naked. “I’ll grab my robe and let her know you’ll give me a ride to the repair shop. And you might as well put on some clothes, too. She’ll want to meet you.”

“Then I can’t disappoint her,” he said, getting out of bed and not missing how her gaze traveled the full length of his body. There was no need to ask if she liked what she saw. All during their lovemaking last night she’d kept saying she did.

“I’ll go downstairs before she calls the police to report you’ve done harm to me and gotten rid of my body. Rissa’s husband, Shayne, is a US Marshal and her mind gets carried away at times.”

Jaxon could certainly arrest Rissa’s fears about him getting rid of Nadia’s body. And speaking of that body, he decided to ask, “How do you feel this morning? Are you sore?”

His question made her blush. “I’m fine, Jaxon. Of course I’m sore, but the best way to work out soreness is to keep the muscles moving.”

He nodded. “May I use your bathroom to freshen up?”

“Sure and there’s a toiletry bag beneath the vanity you can use.”

“Thanks.”

As Jaxon headed for the bathroom, he was glad Nadia had no problem letting her best friend know he'd spent the night. As far as he was concerned, that was a good start.

* * *

“Please wipe that silly-looking grin off your face, Rissa,” Nadia said, stepping aside to let her friend enter her home.

“Well, it took you long enough to open the door and with your robe on and probably wearing nothing underneath, what am I to assume?” Rissa replied with a smirk on her face.

“I don't know, you tell me,” Nadia said, closing the door.

“Well, the one thing I can assume is that you're no longer a twenty-eight-year-old virgin.”

Rissa didn't know just how right she was about that. “I won't say.”

“You don't have to say with all those passion marks on your neck. I'm surprised you can still walk this morning.”

In a way Nadia was surprised, too. Her body was sore but she felt wonderful. “You're a smart woman, Rissa. You saw Jaxon's car out front. After the second knock, you should have kept moving, knowing I would call you later.”

“Are you kidding me? You wanted me to miss seeing a huge smile on your face so I can gladly say I told you so?”

Nadia shook her head. For years Rissa had tried telling Nadia what she'd been missing by not engaging in an intimate relationship with a man. Rissa had accused Nadia of letting Benson win by not getting over what he'd done while they'd been in college.

“Well?”

Nadia glanced over at Rissa. “Well what?”

“I want to see that morning-after smile. The glow is there but I want to see the smile. No way will I believe Jaxon Ravel didn't put a smile on your face.” Rissa then glanced around. “Where is he, by the way?”

“Upstairs, and if it will get you to leave, here's my smile.” Unashamedly, Nadia gave her friend a huge, wide smile. The widest she could make.

Rissa laughed. “I knew it!” She gave Nadia a big hug. “I knew the two of you were meant to be together and—”

“Whoa. Hold up.” Nadia shook her head. “Now you’re talking nonsense,” she said, lowering her voice to a hushed tone. “Jaxon and I are not meant to be together. Last night was one and done. Nothing has changed. It’s back to the way things were before.”

Rissa rolled her eyes and responded in a hushed tone as well. “I hate to tell you but that’s not possible.”

“And why not?”

“Your body knows him. It will want him. It will need him.”

“That’s rubbish. I don’t want nor will I need any man, Rissa,” Nadia said.

“You’ll see and when you do, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Nadia waved off her words. “Whatever.”

“Well, since I’ve seen your smile I’ll leave now and—”

“I hope you’re not leaving on my account,” a male voice said behind them.

Nadia and Rissa glanced around to see Jaxon walking down the stairs. At least he was dressed in his slacks and shirt. Why did he have to look so darn sexy this morning?

Seeing Rissa staring at him as if in a daze, Nadia leaned over and whispered, “Remember, you’re a married woman.”

Rissa snatched her gaze from Jaxon to look at Nadia with a sheepish grin and whispered back, “I’m trying hard to remember.”

Shayne was a good-looking man. But Nadia had to admit, there was good-looking and then there was goody-looking. This morning, Jaxon was not only goody-looking; he was sexy, sensual and salacious.

They watched him come down the stairs. Nadia didn’t know Rissa’s thoughts but she definitely knew hers. *What a man, what a man...* This morning he was jaw-droppingly handsome. Just the thought that last night she had gotten as much of him as he’d gotten of her made goose bumps appear on her body. Even now her gaze was glued to the zipper on his pants as she remembered everything. Every lusty, hungry moment of last night.

When he came to a stop in front of them, Nadia made introductions. Then Jaxon said, “Rissa, I’m happy to meet you. Nadia has told me a lot about you.”

Nadia lifted a brow. Had she? She mentioned that she and Rissa were best friends and had been since they were kids, but that was all. She figured he was just being kind...as usual.

“Thanks and welcome to Gamble. I understand your company is expanding here.”

“That’s right,” he replied with that killer smile. “Will you be joining us for breakfast?”

Breakfast? Nadia wondered what made Jaxon assume he was staying for breakfast. “Rissa has a lot to do today and was just about to leave,” she said, taking her best friend’s arm and leading her toward the door.

“Yes, that’s right. I was about to leave. It was nice meeting you, Jaxon.”

“Same here, Rissa.”

When Nadia closed the door behind Rissa, she turned to Jaxon, ready to light into him about his assumptions about breakfast or that he might be hanging around, period. Maybe she needed to make it clear to him that last night was one and done. She was about to open her mouth when he lowered his lips to hers.

She knew what was about to happen but didn’t want to stop it. Jaxon was seducing her and she was letting him. He began torturing her mouth the way he’d done several times last night. After ending the kiss, he nibbled her lips from corner to corner and then used the tip of his tongue to lick around the lines of her mouth. When she made a breathless sigh, his tongue eased inside her mouth once again, took hold of her tongue and began an intimate, sensual duel.

If that wasn’t enough, she could feel his erection pressed hard against her middle and the more they kissed, the bigger he got. Then suddenly, she was swept into his strong arms as he moved in the direction of the stairs.

* * *

Jaxon had a good idea just what Nadia had expected when he’d swept her into his arms to take her back upstairs. When he entered her bedroom, he hadn’t placed her on the bed but kept moving to the bathroom. Once there he removed her robe before placing her in the warm sudsy water he had prepared for her.

“A good soak will help those sore muscles,” he said, crouching down beside the tub.

“And what will you be doing while I’m soaking?”

He smiled and pushed a wayward lock from her face. “I’m going to the hotel to shower and change. Then I’ll be back to take you to get your car. By then it will be lunchtime. Will you have lunch with me?” He knew to ask rather than to assume. The last thing he wanted was for Nadia to think he was

calling the shots. He was beginning to know her well and the one thing she disliked was a man assuming he had any rights as far as she was concerned. So far everything she'd gotten was what she had asked for.

"Thanks for the invitation, but I have things to do today and I'm sure you do, too."

If she thought that was her way to get rid of him, she was sorely mistaken. He would give her space but he had no intention of leaving her alone completely. Last night was a game changer for them. He'd never known any woman who was more sensual, more uninhibited, more open to trying new things. He'd never forget the moment he realized she was still a virgin. His chest had expanded along with his shaft, knowing he was the first man to go inside her.

Once they'd established that she was on a reliable form of birth control and they both were safe health-wise, he had dispensed with the use of the condom. Each and every time he'd come inside her he'd experienced an earth-shattering orgasm. Hell, he'd lost count of how many times they'd come. They'd even hit multiples a few times. There was no doubt in his mind that he had placed his stamp all over her. Evidently, she hadn't yet seen those passion marks on her neck, not to mention other parts of her body. She now belonged to him as much as he belonged to her.

"Is there anything you need me to do before I leave?"

She lifted her chin. "Of course not. In fact you didn't have to do this. I could have filled my own tub with water."

"I know, but I liked doing it." And before she could say anything, he leaned in and brushed a kiss across her lips. "I'll be back in an hour."

"I can call Rissa to come back and take me to get my car."

Standing, he said, "I want to take you. Besides, earlier you said Rissa had a lot to do today. Whereas, I have plenty of time."

She frowned. "Well, I hope you don't plan to get underfoot by thinking last night meant anything."

Jaxon had news for her. Last night had meant everything. "Are you normally this grouchy in the mornings, Nadia?"

Her frown deepened. "I'm not grouchy."

"Yes, you are. While soaking, you should not only work out the soreness but also the grouchiness. I'll see you later."

He heard what she said when he walked out of the bathroom. Walker Rafferty had said he'd never heard Nadia curse. Jaxon just had, and his ears

were still blistered.

He chuckled as he went down the stairs. Before it was all over, she would probably be inclined to say even more curse words. Nadia was headstrong, opinionated and had no problem stating how she felt about any given topic. She'd done so last night. She liked being in control and for a while he'd let her. He wouldn't change a thing about her. But he would straighten her out on a few things. He was a permanent part of her life and the sooner she accepted that fact the easier things would be for the both of them.

Sixteen

Nadia didn't lean back to relax in the water until she heard the sound of the front door closing and locking behind Jaxon. She couldn't help licking her lips. The man had more sensuality in his lips than some men had in their entire body.

And speaking of his body...

Granted she'd never been in the presence of a naked man, but she couldn't imagine one with a more trim and fit body than Jaxon. She had studied his physique like an architect would study a blueprint. Taking in the solid muscles that seemed to be everywhere. Even his coffee-colored skin tone had seemed to glow beneath her bedroom light.

And he was so well endowed. The thought of that particular body part being inside her most of the night, giving her pleasure, made her shiver at the memories. And when he'd placed his body above hers and stared down into her eyes, every inch of him had been compelling. She drew in a deep breath at the delicious and tantalizing memories. There was no reason to worry about her bathwater turning cold since the heat from her body was definitely keeping it warm. Jaxon Ravel had touched her in the right places and had made a lasting impression on her while doing so.

And that was the crux of her problem. She didn't want any man to make a lasting impression on her. But she couldn't refute the fact that he had. Jaxon had made her first time special. Way too special. Both mentally and physically. He had made it worth the wait. And for some reason that was a sore spot even when it shouldn't be.

She should be elated he had given her such tender, loving care. He'd even run bathwater for her in deference to her well-being. How many men would do such a thing? Some would not have hung around until morning. There were some who wouldn't even invite a woman to their home for the night, preferring to always go to hers. She would eye-roll any woman who allowed such a thing.

A short while later she eased out of the tub to get dressed. Jaxon said he would be back in an hour and there was no reason not to believe him. There

was a lot about him she was trying to figure out. Did he see their relationship changing or did she just assume he did?

Earlier, when he'd invited her to lunch and she'd declined, he hadn't given any pushback. It was as if it hadn't mattered to him one iota if she accepted his lunch invitation or not. And last night, she'd been the one to tell him she wanted to change their relationship just for that night. Did his nonchalance mean anything?

As she slid into her jeans she wondered if she was overthinking the situation. All they'd had was last night. But what if he wanted more? Was he pretending he didn't want more to throw her off kilter? She pushed such a thought from her mind. Jaxon said he was a man who didn't play games with a woman and there was no reason to assume he was doing so now.

Exactly on the hour there was a knock on her door. Giving herself one last look in the mirror, she quickly moved down the stairs to open it. Nadia was glad the weather was cool so it wouldn't look odd for her to be wearing a scarf. The last thing she needed was for anyone to see all those passion marks on her neck. It was bad enough Rissa had seen them.

She glanced through the peephole. It was Jaxon all right and like her, he was wearing jeans and a Western shirt with the top three buttons undone.

Was that on purpose since she'd told him she had a fetish for chest hair? If so, it was working. She could recall last night when she had dragged her fingers through it, buried her face in it. Her thighs quivered at the memories. And as if he knew she was watching him, he smiled. Dang. That smile would be the death of her.

Drawing in a deep breath, she opened the door without asking who it was. No point since he'd known she'd been watching him. "Jaxon, I'm ready and you look nice," she said, grabbing her purse and jacket without inviting him inside.

"So do you and I like your scarf," he replied as he waited for her to lock the door behind her.

"Thanks." Although she thanked him there was no doubt in her mind that he knew why she was wearing one.

They walked side by side down the steps to his parked car. Forever being a gentleman, he opened the door for her. "Thank you, Jaxon."

He smiled down at her. "You're welcome, Nadia."

She frowned when he closed the door to walk around to his side of the car. Why were they acting so formal with each other? This was the same man

who had undressed her last night. The same man she had undressed. The man she'd given her virginity to, and who in the span of fourteen hours had taught her more positions for lovemaking than she'd thought were possible. He had packed a lot into those hours and she had no complaints.

When he got in the car, before starting the engine, he glanced over at her with concern on his features. "Still sore?"

She was about to tell him he was asking her something too personal but then pulled back. Hadn't she just thought they were acting formal with each other? For that reason, she decided to answer. "I'm fine, Jaxon. What about you? Are you sore?" She figured that question would shut him up. They were now discussing her inexperience versus his experience.

"Yes, in fact. I tried some positions with you I've never done with other women."

Yeah, right. "You could have fooled me. You seemed good at everything you were doing."

"Only because it was you."

She rolled her eyes. Did he honestly expect her to believe that? Deciding to change the subject, she said, "If the invitation is still open, I'll have lunch with you."

"Okay," he said, starting the car and driving it out of the yard.

Nadia didn't think he sounded all that enthused about it. "If you'd rather I didn't, then..."

"The invitation is still open, Nadia, and I would love for you to join me for lunch. However, I've made after-lunch plans."

"Oh."

"I'm going horseback riding."

"Horseback riding?"

"Yes. I understand the Ellerey Ranch arranges activities like that."

"They do, and they have some beautiful horses," she said.

"That's what I heard and you're welcome to join me if you like. You did say you can ride a horse, right?"

Did he not believe her? "Yes, and I recall saying I was pretty good at it."

"If you say so."

"And that's what I meant," was her retort.

Nadia wished he hadn't mentioned he was going to the Ellerey's ranch. Immediately, thoughts of Clementine Ellerey, the granddaughter of old man Ellerey, flashed in her mind. Twice divorced at thirty, the woman was known

to be a man-eater. It didn't help matters that a lot of men around these parts thought she was absolutely gorgeous. Well, maybe she was. But that was no reason to deliberately sleep with someone's boyfriend or husband just because she could, if rumors could be believed. Clementine had a reputation around town and not a good one. More than likely, she would be at the ranch, especially if she got wind that Jaxon was coming. Well, Nadia had news for Clementine. Not on her watch.

Nadia turned around in her seat to face Jaxon as he came to the gate that led off the Novak Homestead. "I'd love to join you, and I can't wait to show you how well I can ride."

* * *

After picking up Nadia's car, Jaxon followed her back home. Then they had lunch at a restaurant on the outskirts of town that, in his opinion, served the best BBQ ribs he'd eaten in a long time. When they reached the Ellerey Ranch two horses were saddled and ready for them to ride.

For some reason the man's granddaughter, a woman who looked to be in her late twenties, had saddled the second horse for herself. She'd assumed Jaxon would want company and had invited herself to go riding with him. Why she'd thought such a thing when he didn't even know her, he couldn't say.

It didn't take long to figure out what she was about and he wasn't having it. He let her know that Nadia would be his riding partner. From the way she'd glared at Nadia it was obvious the woman hadn't liked that too much. Not that he'd given a royal damn.

As soon as Nadia was seated in her saddle, she had taken off and he'd chased after her. It didn't take long for her to prove she was the expert horsewoman she'd claimed to be. Not that he'd doubted it for a second. He liked ruffling her feathers. He had enjoyed racing across the valley with her and then trotting along several paths.

"Oh, look," she called out and slowed her horse.

His gaze followed to where she was pointing. A fawn was caught between the fencing. They brought their horses to a stop and Nadia was off before Jaxon could help her down. She rushed over to where the baby deer was crying for its mother.

"Poor thing," Nadia said, glancing around.

“We need to untangle it and set it free,” he said. “It’s my guess the mother is around here somewhere, probably watching and hoping we don’t do her baby any harm. I need to grab a pair of gloves from the saddle bag.”

When he returned, he saw Nadia smoothing the animal with calming words and it was no longer crying. It took them working together to untangle the fawn only because the animal was skittish and frightened. Once they had set it free, the fawn took off. Up in the distance they saw it was joined by the mother and then both animals skedaddled into the woods.

“Well, that was our excitement for today,” Nadia said, smiling.

“There’s a lake over there. We might as well rest the horses and let them take a drink,” he said.

Going back to the horses, they grabbed the reins and walked toward the lake. “When Dad was alive there were a lot of horses on the Novak Homestead,” Nadia said, leaning against a tree. “We had to sell them all when he got sick since money was needed. That’s when I lost my horse. He was one of the ones we had to sell.”

Jaxon nodded. This wasn’t the first time she’d told him how she and her sisters had made sacrifices when their father had taken ill. Sacrifices they had been glad to make so their father could get the best medical care. The first night Jaxon had shared dinner at her place she’d told him how Pam had returned home after giving up acting. Jill had to stop her riding lessons. Yesterday, on the drive to Valley Bluff, they’d passed a dance studio and she told him Paige had been taking dance classes there until their father had gotten too sick for her to continue. Now, Nadia had told him she’d given away a horse that had meant a lot to her.

“What was your horse’s name?” he asked, leaning against a tree opposite her. The fading sun highlighted her features. They were the same beautiful features he’d stared down into last night while making love to her.

“Cocoa. I named him when he was born because he was the color of rich, dark cocoa. He was the best horse a girl could ever have, and he was beautiful.”

“I bet he was.”

“I have a picture of me at eleven sitting on his back. It was the last one Cocoa and I took together.”

Jaxon recalled seeing the framed picture on a wall in her bedroom. He could hear the sadness in her voice. It was sadness he wished he could take away. Deciding to change the subject, he said, “I wonder where this lake

leads to.”

Nadia told him the history of the Ellerey Ranch and how Jamie Ellerey was the descendant of one of the town’s founders. She then told him more of the town’s history and how her great-great grandfather had been one of the first to settle in the area as well. While she was talking, he wondered if she would consider living somewhere else. Or was she pretty rooted here since returning after living in Denver all those years? Gamble was the type of town that could grow on you. Everyone he’d met had been hardworking and friendly. That’s why he knew if Nadia preferred living here permanently, then he would, too. His home would always be with her.

“What’s the deal with Ellerey’s granddaughter? I take it the two of you know each other.”

Nadia nodded. “I’ve known Clementine all my life. Her father was old man Ellerey’s only child and I understand he was a real decent man. When Clementine’s parents were killed in an avalanche during a ski trip, old man Ellerey raised her alone. She was only three and needless to say he spoiled her rotten. She’s always been a pain in everyone’s side. Even as a kid. I’d hoped her attitude had improved when I moved back years later but it hasn’t. She has this entitlement complex. She believes she’s entitled to anything or anyone she wants.”

Jaxon had gotten that same impression.

“I’m sure you noticed how beautiful she is,” Nadia added.

Yes, he’d noticed. “I’m a man who believes inner beauty is just as important as outer beauty. Even more so.” There was no need to add that he’d dated a number of women who’d had the looks of a goddess but possessed hearts of stone.

“It’s time to get back, Jaxon.”

He glanced at his watch. It had gotten late and he hadn’t been aware so much time had passed. “I enjoyed today with you, Nadia.” No need to tell her again how much he’d enjoyed his night with her, too. He had pretty much proved it last night.

She didn’t say anything for a minute and then stated, “And I enjoyed being with you today, too, Jaxon. But nothing has changed.”

“You’re wrong about that. Everything between us has changed after last night.” He wouldn’t waste his time saying that as far as he was concerned last night sealed the deal. “I was your first,” he added.

“But that doesn’t mean you’ll be my last.”

“That’s how I intend for it to be.”

A frown appeared on her face. “Don’t tell me you’re the male version of Clementine with an entitlement complex.”

“I won’t tell you that, but I will tell you this,” he said, crossing the distance separating them. “I don’t make it a habit to have sex with virgins. In fact, I never have before. I could have stopped things before I finished the deed, but you know why I didn’t?”

“Of course I know. The same degree of lust that consumed me also consumed you.”

“Lust had nothing to do with it for me. It was love.”

Her eyes widened. “Love?” She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, that’s rich. Weeks ago, you said you wanted to marry me when you didn’t even know me. Now today you want me to believe you’ve fallen in love with me? Really?”

He glared at her. “Yes, really. I fell in love with you the moment we were introduced.”

She frowned and glared back. “That’s not possible. Besides, I don’t want any man to love me or want to marry me.”

“That’s tough because I do and I will.” Before she could say anything else, Jaxon leaned down and planted his mouth on hers.

She didn’t pull away. Instead, she wrapped her tongue around his the same way she’d done last night. Somehow their mouths always mated in perfect unity. An intense flare of heat consumed his entire body while he held her in his arms and continued to kiss her like he never wanted to stop. She might be mad at him but it was obvious she wanted this kiss as much as he did.

What was she afraid of and why?

When he finally released her lips, he stared into her eyes, which had a look that all but said she couldn’t believe she had let him kiss her and that she had kissed him back. Her next words proved it. “We should not have done that.”

He tilted the Stetson back from his eyes to gaze down at her. “Everything we’ve done or are doing was meant to be, Nadia.”

The glare was back in her eyes. “I disagree. I’m ready to go, Jaxon.”

“Okay, but there’s something I want to ask you first.”

“What?”

“Who hurt you?”

She broke eye contact with him to look away and then she looked back at him. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do. There’s a reason you hold yourself back.”

She threw her head back and laughed again. “Hold myself back? What about last night? If anything, I let myself go.”

“Yes, and it took you twenty-eight years to do so. I want to know what man broke your heart to make you not want to fall in love again. Twenty-eight-year-old virgins are rare these days.”

“That’s none of your business, Jaxon.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Every single thing about you is my business, Nadia.”

Jaxon watched an angry Nadia walk over to her horse. After mounting it, she glanced over at him. “No, it’s not. I don’t want or need a man in my life.”

“Well, I want and need you in mine, Nadia.”

She glared at him before nudging her horse and taking off racing across the field.

* * *

Nadia was quiet on the drive back to the Novak Homestead. Jaxon thought about engaging her in conversation but decided against it. He’d said his piece so he let her stew. But anger or no anger, he could still feel the sexual chemistry surrounding them in the confines of the car. In a way, he really shouldn’t have been surprised. If nothing else, last night proved just how combustible they were. How well connected. For her, it might only have been lust, but for him it was love.

When he brought the car to a stop in front of the house, she got out without waiting for him to come around to open the car door for her. “Don’t bother. I can see myself inside.”

Ignoring what she said, he got out anyway and walked a few paces behind her. He shouldn’t be noticing, but he liked the way her jeans shaped her backside and loved the sashay of her hips when she walked. The woman couldn’t help being sexy no matter what she put on her body or took off of it.

When she reached the door and unlocked it, she did glance over her shoulder to say, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome and flick the curtains or open the blinds to let me know you’re safe inside. And Nadia?”

She slowly turned to him. He hadn’t even come up the steps to the porch. Instead, he stood back. He knew if he got too close, he would want to pull her

into his arms and kiss her. “I meant everything I said about my feelings for you. I love you and have from the moment we were introduced. If you change your mind about me, about us, then you know how to reach me.”

He watched her go inside and closed the door. He didn't move off the steps to return to his car until she had flicked the curtain.

Seventeen

Nadia jumped when Rissa snapped her fingers in front of Nadia's face. She hadn't known her best friend had even moved out of the chair. Nadia frowned. "What did you do that for?"

Rissa returned to her chair in front of Nadia's desk. "To get your attention. You've been zoning out on me since I got here. Do you want to talk about it?"

She was about to tell Rissa that no, she didn't want to talk about it. Rissa had been trying to get information out of Nadia since the moment she'd arrived. However, the teasing glint in Rissa's eyes had been replaced with concern. She heard it in her friend's voice and saw it in her face.

Other than her sisters, Rissa knew Nadia better than anyone. If she could feel Nadia was out of sorts, then her worry was justified. Nadia was not one to let a man get under her skin. Yet Jaxon had done so.

"Jaxon and I argued."

Rissa nodded her head as if not surprised. "The two of you have been at odds since he told you he wanted to marry you. I thought you guys had declared a truce or something since you slept with him Friday night."

"It's gotten worse."

Rissa lifted a brow. "How?"

"Now he thinks he's in love with me."

Rissa stared at her for a moment and then asked, "He actually told you that?"

"Yes. It was when we'd gone riding at the Ellerey Ranch on Saturday. We were at the lake letting our horses rest and he said he loved me. He also said he felt entitled to me because he was the first guy I slept with."

Rissa frowned. "Did he really say that?"

"No, but that's the way he acted."

"Or is that the way you took it, Nadia? I know you. And the one thing I do know is you have a tendency to make a mountain out of a molehill."

When Nadia didn't say anything, Rissa leaned back in her chair and studied her. "Why do I have the feeling you aren't telling me everything?"

Probably because she wasn't, Nadia thought. She hadn't told Rissa of her unusual feeling of jealousy when she'd seen a picture of Jaxon's administrative assistant on his website and how relieved she was when he'd said the beautiful woman was getting married. Nor had she told her how she'd deliberately gone horseback riding with him just so Clementine Ellerey wouldn't get her clutches in him.

"I'm getting jealous where Jaxon is concerned."

Rissa raised a brow. "Jealous in what way?"

She then told Rissa of the two situations and when a smile spread across Rissa's lips, she asked, "Why are you smiling?"

"Because you're not a woman who makes a habit of getting jealous over a man. That could only mean one thing."

"What?"

"You care for Jaxon Ravel more than you're admitting to me and, more importantly, to yourself."

"I don't want a man in my life. Especially not him."

"Why not him?" Rissa asked with a sheen of curiosity in her eyes.

Nadia inhaled deeply as she struggled to say the words to make Rissa understand. "Because Jaxon is too good to be true. Everybody likes him. I told you how he exposed that man who was deceiving the Outlaws. He didn't have to do that, but he did. Now the Westmorelands and Outlaws think he's a swell guy. Even all the women in the family like him."

"All the women but you." Rissa hadn't stated it as a question.

"I don't dislike him."

Rissa chuckled. "Heck, I hope not after all that bumping and grinding the two of you did Friday night and early Saturday morning."

Nadia shrugged. "Women have been known to sleep with men they don't like."

"Not most women and definitely not you." Rissa finished the last of her coffee and tossed the cup in the trash can at the side of Nadia's desk. "But I still don't understand. Why are you afraid of getting involved with Jaxon? Do you think he will play you like Benson did?"

"Of course not."

"Then what is it, Nadia?"

"I'm not his type. He should be interested in a woman with grace and refinement. One full of sophistication."

"That's utter nonsense. If Jaxon says he loves you and wants to marry you

then that means you are the woman he wants. Besides, worrying about if you're Jaxon's type might be the least of your problems, Nadia."

"What do you mean?"

"You know Jaxon. Your mouth knows him. Your tongue knows him. In other words, your entire being knows him. I bet you spent this weekend remembering how good things were with him. How the real thing was better compared to your dreams. How he knocked all your fantasies right out of the ballpark."

Nadia rolled her eyes, refusing to admit everything Rissa said was true. "You act as if Jaxon will become an addiction."

"It's a good chance he might. Maybe he already is. I think you've fallen for Jaxon, but you're fighting it like hell."

Nadia sat straight up in her chair. "I don't love Jaxon."

Rissa waved off her words. "You can deny it all you want but the signs are there. Anytime you mention his name your eyes light up. Your breathing changes. Personally, I think it's wonderful that he loves you and wants to marry you and has told you so. How many men are that up front with a woman?" Rissa then glanced at her watch and stood. "I gotta leave now to get to work on time. Remember I'll be out of town the rest of the week on that business trip to San Diego. However, if you need to talk, I'll just be a phone call away."

Nadia nodded, knowing this issue with Jaxon was something she had to figure out for herself.

* * *

It was past six on Thursday when Nadia finally left the academy for home. Usually, she didn't work so late but Langley had called with the budget for Ravel Technologies' sponsorship. It was more than she and her staff had anticipated. Definitely a lot more than the Dunnings Financial Group had agreed to give them. Langley even mentioned that Jaxon had suggested using the local theater instead of the high school's auditorium. Additional funds would be allotted if she chose to do so.

She had immediately liked the idea and had called an impromptu meeting with her staff to see what they thought. Everyone got all excited. They couldn't wait to share the news with the students tomorrow.

Jill and Paige had called before Nadia had closed up her office. Both were

excited about the surprise party for Quade Westmoreland's wife, Cheyenne, this weekend and wanted to know when she'd be arriving. When she'd told them she had just purchased her ticket that morning, Paige asked why she hadn't caught a ride with Jaxon on his plane. Saying he probably would not have minded since he would be attending the party, too.

She'd told Paige there was no way she could have imposed like that. What if he was bringing a date? Jill agreed with Nadia and said although Jaxon had never brought a woman to any of the family's functions before, that didn't mean he would never bring one. After all Jaxon was single and good-looking. Paige still thought it shouldn't be an issue. All Jaxon had to do was to tell his date that Nadia was nothing more than a family friend.

Nothing more than a family friend...

She hadn't yet told her sisters how her relationship with Jaxon had taken a turn since that time she'd invited him to dinner. In a way, she was glad she hadn't shared the news since she and Jaxon were back to not having a relationship at all, although according to Jaxon, he loved her and wanted to marry her.

She would admit she wasn't as shocked now by what he'd said as she had been on Saturday. That had been five days ago. Since then she'd done a lot of thinking. Rissa had been right. Nadia was falling for Jaxon.

It had taken her five days and sleepless nights to finally accept that. She had thought a lot about him since Saturday and now it was Thursday. She missed him and constantly replayed in her mind the time they'd spent together. She also replayed in her mind the dinners they'd shared, both at her home and on his jet.

However, more than anything she thought about that day last year when they'd been introduced. She had been attracted to him from the start and, according to him, he'd been more than attracted. He claimed he'd fallen in love with her. Could she believe that? Hadn't he said at lunch that day that his father had fallen in love with his mother the same way?

She'd also heard about such things happening to a couple of the Westmoreland men, like Bane. He swore he'd fallen for Crystal when he'd come upon her walking home from school. He hadn't hesitated to turn his motorcycle around and introduce himself. And Dillon claimed he'd fallen in love with Pam even though she'd been engaged to Fletcher. Could she believe such a thing happened to Jaxon?

Getting into her car, she started the engine. As she drove out of the parking

lot, she thought about what she'd seen that night when they'd viewed the Milky Way. She hadn't mentioned it to Rissa because her friend was one of those believers and would have sworn that was the sign Nadia needed that she and Jaxon were destined to share everlasting love. Were they?

I meant everything I said about my feelings for you. I love you and have from the moment we were introduced. If you change your mind about me, about us, then you know how to reach me.

Why was she remembering Jaxon's words now? Why had she thought of them a lot this week? Why was her heart beating so fast? And why was she getting off the exit that would take her to Jaxon's hotel? It was one of the newest hotels in the city and she'd heard it was one of the fanciest. When it was first built it had seemed out of place in a ranch town. However, now it fit. More importantly, it fit a man like Jaxon.

She pulled into his hotel and parked her car. Why was she here? Would he be upset that she showed up unannounced? She couldn't worry about that now. The one thing she did know was that she missed him and more than anything she wanted to see him.

* * *

Jaxon was about to order room service when he heard the knock at his hotel room door. He frowned, hoping like hell it wasn't Clementine Ellerey. The woman had had the audacity to come to his hotel room a few days ago. He'd opened the door, but of course he hadn't let her in.

He'd tried telling her in the nicest way that he wasn't interested. When it seemed his words were falling on deaf ears, he'd had to be frank. She wasn't his type and he would appreciate if she left him alone and moved on and not invite herself to his hotel room again. Ms. Ellerey hadn't liked that one iota and threatened to ruin his name in town by saying he'd sexually harassed her. There had been no doubt in her mind the townspeople would believe her over him. After all, she was a hometown girl and that meant something in Gamble.

He was glad he'd anticipated she would make such a move, after that stunt she'd tried on Saturday and after hearing Nadia's opinion of her. Saturday night he'd called Martin Lockley, the man who handled all his security, to run a check on her. He'd gotten Lockley's report first thing Monday morning and it was rather colorful and informative.

There were four men in Gamble she was currently sleeping with behind

their wives' backs. When he'd told Ms. Ellerey everything he knew about her and assured her he wouldn't hesitate to share the report with the good people of Gamble if she carried out her threats, she quickly left.

He glanced out his door's peephole. It wasn't Clementine Ellerey but was the woman who'd been on his mind constantly since parting ways with her on Saturday evening. That had been five days ago and although he'd missed her like hell, he'd wanted to give her space to think about all he'd said. Things he had no intention of backing down on.

Had she come to give him another piece of her mind or was she here because she believed what he'd said? As if she knew he was staring at her, she stared back and sensations ripped through him. He had to breathe slowly for air to flow through his lungs.

Opening the door to his suite, he didn't bother to ask what she was doing there. It didn't matter because he was glad to see her. "Hello, Nadia."

"Hello, Jaxon. May I come in?"

As far as he was concerned, she could come in and stay and never leave. "Yes," he said and stepped aside for her to enter.

She was certainly getting a different reception than the one he'd given Clementine Ellerey. But then this was the woman he was deeply in love with. The one he wanted more than anything to share his life with. She looked good in her plaid pencil skirt, earth-tone suede knee-high boots and matching suede jacket.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants. Otherwise, he would be tempted to reach out and pull her into his arms. Desire between them was always intense, heated and charged. Tonight, it seemed even more so. Sexual chemistry dominated the air they shared, like usual. They stood staring at each other, feeling it shimmering around them.

The moonlight filtering through the curtains seemed to fill the room with an ethereal light that bathed her in a radiant glow. Maybe it was his eyes, but she appeared even more beautiful tonight than ever before. The room seemed electrified. He was convinced all it would take was a touch to send sparks flying.

"I want to thank you for that suggestion you made for the academy to hold the play at the theater in town," she finally broke the silence to say.

He nodded. "You didn't have to come all the way over here to thank me, Nadia."

"I know. That's not the only reason I'm here."

“It’s not?”

“No. I felt the need to talk to you about something, Jaxon.”

He wondered what she wanted to talk about. Just her being here in his hotel suite was causing heat to stir in his groin. More than anything, he needed to keep his control in check. “Okay, come into the sitting area. We can talk there,” he said, leading the way. His suite was spacious, but at the moment it seemed way too cozy.

“Please have a seat,” he said, offering her the sofa. When she moved around him, her hips accidentally brushed against his. Suddenly, like a magnet, their bodies connected, and he drew her to him and lowered his head to hers.

Eighteen

The moment Jaxon's lips touched hers, Nadia felt energized, mesmerized and totally captivated. Automatically, her arms went around his neck and her body pressed hard against his. She felt him; there were just some things a man couldn't hide and a full-blown erection was one of them.

And now he was kissing her the way she wanted. The way she needed. It always amazed her how his tongue could work its way around her mouth, eliciting hers to participate and duel in the most sensuous way. Every bone in her body felt completely enthralled. Whenever he kissed her, she was incapable of holding back. He made her feel things she'd never felt before, and all from a kiss. But she knew tonight they would share more than a kiss. The reason she'd come was to talk, but she had no problem getting this first. Like him, she needed it now. Talking would come later.

When he swept her into his arms without breaking the kiss, she tightened her hold around his neck. He wanted her and she wanted him. Something else she knew now with all certainty was that she *did* love him. The moment he had opened the door and she'd looked into his face, she'd known. The face she had dreamed about for over a year, the face that belonged to her fantasy man. She could not fight emotions she'd been too afraid to face any longer.

Jaxon broke off the kiss when he placed her on the bed. Then he stepped back, held her gaze and began removing his clothes. Likewise, she began dispensing with hers. No words were spoken. None were needed. Their kiss had told them everything.

"I've missed you," he said in a deep, throaty voice.

She was about to tell him that he'd known where to find her, but didn't. She had needed the space, the distance and the longing. She was even glad Rissa had been out of town on that business trip. Nadia's feelings for Jaxon were something she'd needed to figure out for herself, and she had.

Staring deep into his gaze, she said, "And I missed you, too. I'm here now and so are you."

He nodded. "And that's all that matters."

Moving closer to the bed, he pulled her into his arms and she went

willingly. Together they fell back onto the mattress with their lips joined. She doubted she would ever tire of being kissed by him. His kisses were always mind-blowingly hot.

Moments later, he broke off the kiss, and in a surprise move, he shifted his body so she was on top of him. At the questioning look he must have seen in her eyes, he said, "Tonight, I want you to ride me. After seeing you on a horse I know how good you are at it."

She smiled down at him. "I plan to do my best."

* * *

Jaxon quickly concluded that if Nadia got any better she would kill him. She was riding him right into another orgasm. The third for the both of them. She would come and he would follow like clockwork. It was like she hadn't gotten enough of him any more than he'd gotten enough of her. How long would they keep this up? Probably until neither had strength to do anything else.

With each and every upward thrust from him, she would grind her hips against his in a way that had an abundance of liquid heat coiling in his erection. He gazed up into her eyes and what he saw took his breath away. He didn't see lust-filled eyes but ones full of something else. But then, maybe he was seeing what he wanted to see and not what was really there.

All thoughts fled his mind when the sounds of Nadia's moans reached a high peak. Just the thought that she was riding him with the expertise she'd ridden that horse on Saturday made his breath rush from his lungs. She continued to take him inch by incredibly sweet inch.

Now her hips were coming down faster and harder. Every cell in his body was set and ready to explode the moment she did. She was still tight and he could feel her body tighten even more and pulse around him. And each time she came down on him their gazes caught and locked. He cupped a hand across her bottom, loving the feel of the movement she made every time their bodies connected.

"Jaxon!"

Then it happened. An explosion that plunged them into sweet oblivion. When she came downward on him again, he dragged his tongue over her face, licking the moisture that had accumulated there. Another shudder of pleasure tore through them and this time it was him who yelled out her name.

“Nadia!”

Waves of pleasure shot through every part of him and then detonated on glorious impact. He knew that for as long as he lived every time they came together would be burned into his memory as well as his heart. When her body collapsed on his, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. Unable to hold it back, he whispered. “I love you, Nadia.”

She went still and then lifted her head off his chest and looked into his eyes. “And I love you, too.”

Then she closed her eyes and slept.

* * *

Nadia came awake to the feel of someone’s tongue licking across her face. Slowly opening her eyes, she met Jaxon’s gaze. He was no longer in the bed with her but was sitting on the side of the mattress next to her. When she reached out to him, he pulled her into his lap and gave her a kiss that she felt all the way to her toes.

When he released her mouth, he said, “Did you mean what you said?”

She knew what he was asking and nodded. “Yes.” She drew in a deep breath and with it came the scent of their lovemaking that was still very potent in the room. “There is so much I need to tell you, Jaxon.”

“Okay, but we need to eat first.”

“Eat?”

“Yes, I ordered room service. I don’t know about you, but I’m famished.”

She was hungry, too, since she hadn’t eaten since lunch. She glanced over at the clock on his nightstand. “It’s after ten?”

“Yes. We’ve been busy.”

She couldn’t help but smile. That was an understatement. He stood with her in his arms and placed her on her feet. “Do I need to run warm bathwater for you or are you okay?”

“I’m okay.” Nodding, he went to the closet and grabbed one of the hotel’s complimentary robes. It was a match to the one he was wearing. “I don’t have a problem if you want to walk around naked, but I figure we need to give our bodies a rest while we eat.”

She totally agreed. As soon as she slid into her robe, which he helped her do, he swept her back into his arms and carried her out of the bedroom to the dining area, where a table for two was set up. Complete with candles and

wineglasses. Several bottles of champagne sat chilling in an ice-bucket.

“The table setting is beautiful. But what’s with the champagne? You do know I have to go to work tomorrow, right?” she said, when he placed her in her chair.

“You sure you don’t want to play hooky?”

“I want to but I’d better not. Besides, I’m getting off early tomorrow to pack and fly to DC tomorrow evening for Cheyenne’s surprise birthday party.”

“Cancel your flight. You can fly with me on my jet. I’m leaving tomorrow as well.”

“What time?”

“Whenever you’re ready to go. My time is your time.”

“Thanks.” She uncovered her dishes and smiled. “This looks delicious,” she said of the steak and potatoes on her plate.

“It is. I’ve had it before and the chef here is pretty good. I believe you will enjoy it.”

She did. Over dinner she told him how excited her staff was about his sponsorship and how a special assembly was scheduled tomorrow morning where it would be announced that the venue for the play would be the theater instead of the high school’s auditorium.

“I can’t wait to see the student’s faces.” She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

He smiled at her. “I was happy to do it.” He glanced at both their empty plates. “Are you ready for our talk now?”

She nodded. “Yes, I’m ready.”

* * *

Not wanting Nadia too far away from him, Jaxon gathered her into his arms, carried her over to the sofa and sat down with her in his lap. “Now tell me what we need to talk about, sweetheart.”

It took her a minute to speak, and he figured she was collecting her thoughts. That had to be the reason she was looking down while fidgeting with the buttons on her robe. Finally, she said, “His name was Benson Cummings. I met him at the University of Wyoming the second week of class. I immediately liked him since he seemed like a nice guy. It only took me five months to find out what a total ass he was when it was discovered he

was keeping a journal of all the freshmen girls he'd slept with or planned to sleep with. I was on his to-do list. Not only that, he had the date by my name and his friends were going to video us doing it." She paused. "I was hurt since I honestly thought he liked me as much as I'd liked him. I had fallen hard for him, Jaxon."

"So what did you do about it?" he asked her when she got silent, looking back down at the buttons on her robe. He was fighting back the anger he felt for what the guy had done and had planned to do.

She lifted her head to gaze into his eyes. "What do you mean what did I do about it?"

Jaxon fought back a smile. Those innocent-looking eyes staring into his weren't fooling him any. She was a renegade, a rebel and a hellion. She would not have let that Cummings guy get away with anything. "Just what I asked, Nadia. What did you do about it?"

She went back to fidgeting with the buttons again. Clearing her throat she said, "Well, there was that time we emptied twenty-five bottles of chocolate syrup into his car and then dumped several bags of live ants in there as well."

Jaxon's eyes widened. "Who were 'we' and where did you get bags of live ants?"

She looked back up at him and smiled. "We, meaning me, Rissa and Lilli. And as for the live ants, it just so happens that one of the agricultural labs on campus was working on several ant farms. We got them from there." Nadia paused and said, "Then there was that other incident."

"What other incident?"

"The one that got him expelled from school."

Jaxon was almost too afraid to ask what Nadia had done to make that happen. "Tell me about it."

"We found out he was sneaking girls from another campus into his dorm room for pot parties. The kind that ended up being orgies. The security guy on campus got an anonymous tip about it and Benson, his roommates and several others were caught red-handed. All naked as the day they were born."

"I guess you were the one who provided the anonymous tip."

"Of course." She laughed and he couldn't help but laugh as well.

"Cummings never traced his misfortunes back to you?"

"Nope. I played the innocent. Besides, he had over twenty girls' names on that list. It could have been any of us out for revenge."

But it was you, he thought. Good for her. "And because of him you were

cautious about getting serious about any guy again?”

“Yes. But years passed and when I moved back to Gamble, I decided to have an open mind. Especially with so many good-looking cowboys around here. The first one I met was Hoyle Adams. Like Benson, he seemed nice enough. He asked me out to the movies, and I enjoyed myself. He seemed to be a perfect gentleman. So I invited him to dinner one evening.”

“And?”

She frowned. “And he thought the dinner invitation was really a sleepover. Imagine my shock when he went out to his truck for his overnight bag while I was in the kitchen getting dessert. He honestly thought he was spending the night. I tossed him and his overnight bag out the door.”

He fought back a grin. “No wonder you went off on me that night I asked about inviting a cowboy to dinner.”

“Yes, that was the reason.” She got quiet and then said, “Just so you know, Jaxon, I was attracted to you from the first. But I thought it was one sided since you weren’t paying me any attention. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself so I deliberately avoided you.”

“Like I told you, I was trying to play it safe by not showing my interest in you immediately. The last thing I wanted was one of my Outlaw cousins or the Westmorelands to challenge me to a fistfight for getting out of line with you.”

She chuckled. “They would not have done that. If anything, they would have warned you away from me. They know how I can be at times.”

“I take it you never told them about Cummings.”

“There was no need. I handled it.”

She most certainly had. “Is there anything else I need to know?”

She turned around to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Nothing other than I meant what I said in bed. I love you. I fought it. I kept telling myself I couldn’t love you because we didn’t know each other. I even convinced myself it was just lust, but I was wrong.”

“And when did you realize you were wrong and it was more than lust?”

“Tonight. The minute you opened the door. Seeing you again put a lot of things in perspective. I had missed you so much and it had only been five days. I wondered how I would handle it if it had been five weeks, five months or five years. That’s when I knew I loved you, Jaxon.”

“And I love you, sweetheart. And I meant what I told you that night. I intend to marry you one day. Granted, I hadn’t planned to tell you about my

plans that soon, but I felt I had to be honest with you. I didn't want you to think all I was interested in was sex."

She smiled. "It was hard to believe you were serious since most men run away from marriage."

"Not me. My parents set good examples for me to follow."

"Are you sure about me? I'm not a sophisticated or refined kind of woman."

"Trust me, you're the kind of woman I need, want and desire."

"And speaking of desire..." she whispered against his lips. "What will it take for you to give me one more steamy night?"

"All you have to do is ask."

"Well, I'm asking, Jaxon."

He stood with her in his arms and headed for the bedroom.

Nineteen

Nadia knew the moment her sisters Jill and Paige arrived at Cheyenne Steele Westmoreland's birthday party, which was being held in the nation's capital at the Saxon Hotel. The huge ballroom of the luxurious hotel was beautifully decorated with balloons and birthday streamers. Nadia had seen her sister Pam when she first arrived a short while ago.

To say Cheyenne had been surprised about the party was an understatement. Quade had told her they would be attending another joint fundraiser for his two senator cousins, Reggie Westmoreland and Jess Outlaw. She hadn't suspected a thing and the look on her face when she'd entered the ballroom to discover the party was in her honor was priceless.

Nadia thought it was good seeing so many Westmorelands and Outlaws together. If anyone found it odd that Jaxon was always by her side, they didn't mention it. However, several women in the family did give her curious looks. The men did not, and she thought that was rather strange.

She braced herself when she saw Jill and Paige make a beeline straight to her. None of her sisters had a clue about her and Jaxon. She hadn't had a chance to pull them aside to tell them anything yet.

After greeting everyone in the group standing around Nadia, Paige and Jill gave their sister a hug. "When did you arrive in town?" Paige asked.

"I got in early today." No need to tell her that her plans to arrive yesterday had been waylaid when instead of helping her pack like he claimed he would do, Jaxon had kept her on her back in bed. But then she'd kept him on his back a few times as well.

"That's why we couldn't reach you. You were probably in the air," Jill surmised.

"Probably. I caught a ride with Jaxon on his jet."

Both women shifted their gazes to Jaxon and smiled. "Thanks for getting her here. Does that mean you didn't bring a date?" Jill asked.

Jaxon lifted a brow. "A date?"

"Yes. We had suggested early in the week that Nadia catch a ride here with you, but she was worried you might be bringing a date and didn't want to

impose,” Paige said.

Jaxon smiled back. “Oh, I see. And to answer your question, yes, I brought a date. In fact, I brought the woman I intend to marry as soon as she’s ready to tell me yes.”

Nadia noticed several people around them had their eyes and ears on Jaxon and she knew why. He’d never mentioned being in a serious relationship with anyone. “Really?” Paige said, smiling brightly.

Jill’s and Paige’s gazes searched the group surrounding them before glancing around the room. They then turned their gazes back to Jaxon. “Where is she? We can’t wait to meet her,” Jill said.

A huge smile spread across Jaxon’s lips. “She’s standing right in front of you.” He wrapped his arm around Nadia’s waist before leaning in to brush a kiss on her lips.

“What! When! How!” Her sisters’ squeals of excitement caused others to look their way. Then others came over to join them to hear the details.

“Don’t tell me you and Jaxon pulled a secret affair like me and Aidan,” Jill said, grinning from ear to ear.

Nadia chuckled as she leaned back against Jaxon. “There was nothing secret about us, trust me. None of you were in Gamble to get into our business.”

Paige was about to make a comment when suddenly Clint Westmoreland, who was standing in the group, exclaimed, “Who the hell is that guy that just walked in?”

Everyone turned toward the entrance of the ballroom. It was Chance Steele, one of Cheyenne’s cousins, who answered, “That’s Dominic’s best friend, Matt Caulder. They were raised together as brothers. Do you know him?”

Before Clint could answer, his brother Cole and his sister Casey, along with their spouses, walked up. Nadia noticed that the same shocked look that was on Clint’s face was on his siblings’. His sister Casey asked Clint in a deep, emotional voice. “Do you see that guy’s face, Clint?”

“Yes, I see it.”

Now everyone was curious as to what was going on. Nadia studied the guy who seemed to be in his midforties and who she thought was very handsome and distinguished looking.

“Hey, while you’re all interested in the guy, I want to know about the young woman with him,” Alisdare Westmoreland said. “Is that his wife,

girlfriend, sister or daughter?” Nadia could only assume Alisdare, who at twenty-nine was single and worked as a FBI agent, was hoping it was one of the latter two.

“The young lady with Matt is his daughter,” Sebastian Steele, another one of Cheyenne’s cousins, said. He turned to Clint. “Why the interest in Matt? What’s wrong with his face?”

Clint glanced over at him and said, “Nothing, other than it’s the spitting image of our Uncle Sid, and we want to know why.”

* * *

It was after midnight when Jaxon opened his hotel room door and stepped aside to let Nadia enter. Thanks to Dominic everyone attending Cheyenne’s birthday party was given complimentary accommodations. Jaxon had upgraded to one of the larger suites on the other side of the hotel for privacy.

A lot of celebrating had been going on, not just for Cheyenne’s birthday but once news got around that the Westmoreland triplets—Clint, Cole and Casey—had found their long-lost cousin, the son of Sid Roberts, the legendary rodeo star and renowned horse trainer. Matt Caulder had never known the identity of his biological father, but that night he learned that Sid had hired someone to find him, and they’d looked for him for years, but they never found him. Everyone was excited when the triplets’ father, Corey Westmoreland, had welcomed Matt to the Westmoreland family as an honorary member. In a shocking move, Bart Outlaw had done the same.

Jaxon was glad that since accepting his relationship to the Westmorelands, Bart was doing a better job of connecting. Jaxon’s Outlaw cousins thought Bart’s marriage to Claudia had a lot to do with it and Jaxon would agree. Bart could still be his ornery self at times but these days he was more hospitable and sociable. Jaxon’s parents had even invited Bart and Claudia to Virginia over the summer, so his mother could visit with her cousin Bart. The two couples got along wonderfully.

“It was a great party, wasn’t it?”

Nadia’s words cut into Jaxon’s thoughts as he leaned against the closed hotel room door and watched as she kicked off her stilettos. She had worn a short and sexy dress that showed what a great pair of legs she had. “Yes, it was. There were quite a number of revelations tonight. The one that really took me by surprise was Quade and Cheyenne’s announcement that they’re

having another baby,” Nadia said. “Their triplets are in their early teens. But they’d always said they wanted other kids. It will be funny if they have another set of triplets like Bane and Crystal.”

“Well, according to Quade they aren’t worried about it. If it happens, it happens,” Jaxon said, moving away from the door. “And what do you think of Quade’s father James’s announcement that he’s located more Westmorelands?”

Nadia chuckled. “From the cheers that went up around the ballroom, I think everyone was happy and excited about it. James is considered the genealogist in the family. I understand he’s been on the trail of those particular Westmorelands for a while. Ever since it was reported in a national newspaper some years back that the wife of some man with the last name Westmoreland had given birth to quadruplets.”

Jaxon smiled as he came to stand in front of her. “I’m sure that was the first clue there might be a connection.”

“What?”

“Multiple births. It seems such a thing runs rampant with the Westmorelands and Outlaws.”

Nadia threw her head back and laughed. “You noticed?”

“Can’t help but notice. I think Adrian and Aidan get a kick out of fooling me every time. I still can’t tell them apart.”

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Maybe one day I’ll let you in on the secret as to how to do that.”

He leaned in and nibbled around her lips. “Promise?”

“Um, yes. A number of people were surprised to discover we’re together. Mostly the ladies. The men, however, didn’t seem surprised. Would you care to explain that?”

He leaned back and stared down at her. “They weren’t surprised because they knew I intended to marry you.”

She lifted a brow. “And just how did they know that?”

“I told them when we were together at the poker tournament in Westmoreland Country.”

“That was in August. Three months ago.”

“I know,” he said, smiling. “I knew from the first that you were the woman for me. Am I the man for you, Nadia?”

She lifted up on tiptoes to brush her lips across his and whispered, “Yes, Jaxon, you are definitely the man for me.”

“Good.” He then swept her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He placed her on her feet beside the bed. Stepping back, he reached for the duffel bag he’d placed there earlier and retrieved a small white box. Kneeling on one knee in front of her, he said, “If you believe that then will you marry me? Will you share my life, my name and my babies as my wife?”

Tears filled her eyes as she nodded and said, “Yes!”

Jaxon slid his ring on her finger, stood and pulled her into his arms. “You have made me a happy man, and just so you know, my parents knew about my intentions as well. I talked to them earlier and they want you to know they are excited to welcome you to the family.”

“Oh, Jaxon,” she said, wiping away the tears that had appeared in her eyes as she gazed down at her ring. “It’s beautiful. I’m so happy.”

“So am I, sweetheart. So am I.”

He then leaned in and captured her mouth in his.

Epilogue

Nadia's heart nearly stopped when she saw Jaxon standing beneath the beautifully decorated gazebo that overlooked Gemma Lake. It was a beautiful day in June and it was her wedding day. Jaxon had wanted a Christmas wedding, but she had talked him out of that. So much was already on her plate with the holiday play, and she wouldn't have time to plan the type of wedding she'd always wanted. Besides, she'd always wanted a June wedding.

For the time being, he had moved into the house on the Novak Homestead with her. He'd been kept busy with getting everything set up for the expansion of Ravel Technologies into Gamble. The weekend following Cheyenne's birthday party, he had flown Nadia to his home in Virginia. She had fallen in love with his ranch immediately and couldn't wait to move there after they married. His parents had been awesome and were happy for them. She knew she was blessed to be getting such wonderful in-laws.

She glanced around at all the people in attendance—family, friends and some of Jaxon's business associates. Alpha, Riley's wife, was the event planner in the Westmoreland family. Everything was beautifully decorated in colors of pink and black. Her sisters and the women in the family thought Nadia had gone loco when she told them of her decision to break from tradition and wear a black wedding dress instead of a white one.

The one person who thought it was a great idea was Jaxon's mother. She had worn black on her wedding day and offered Nadia her wedding dress to wear. It was beautiful and the moment Nadia had tried it on she thought it embodied elegance. Made of intricate floral lace appliqués and embellished with over five thousand beads and sequins. She especially loved the illusion plunge bodice and lace-trimmed keyhole back. The soft, sweeping skirt had a double slit that would swish with her every step.

Once she'd explained to them a black wedding dress symbolized the bride's undying love and commitment to her husband until death do them part, they understood. And when they saw her in it for the first time, they cried. Now seeing how Jaxon was staring at her let her know she'd made the right decision because he knew what wearing the black wedding dress meant.

“You’re ready, Nadia?”

She glanced over at the man who would be walking her down the aisle and smiled. “Yes, Dillon. I’m ready.” And she was. She loved Jaxon and was looking forward to sharing the rest of her life with him. She smiled as she strolled closer to him then looked over at her twenty bridesmaids, who were pretty in their beautiful pink gowns. Pam was her matron of honor and Jaxon’s father was his best man. The groomsmen wore black tuxes with pink shirts and black bow ties.

Anyone who hadn’t known of Nadia’s plans to wear a black wedding dress were first sending choruses of “What?” around the room. And then those choruses were replaced with oohs and ahhs... She glanced at her mother-in-law, who winked at her, and she winked back. Her mother-in-law was silently telling her she looked beautiful. Nadia felt beautiful.

When they reached Jaxon and the minister asked who was giving her away, Dillon spoke up and then placed her hand in Jaxon’s. Nadia leaned over to kiss Dillon’s cheek and said, “Thanks for everything and thanks for marrying Pammie and making us a part of your family.”

She then turned to Jaxon and smiled. Just like her wedding dress signified, he was the man she would love for the rest of her life.

* * *

“And where are you taking me, Jaxon?” Nadia asked as he held her hand.

“To my barn.”

He glanced down at his wife of less than twenty-four hours. After the wedding and reception, instead of flying straight to the Maldives, where they would spend a two-week honeymoon, he had flown her to his ranch, where he wanted to present her with her wedding gift.

They had changed out of their wedding attire and were both wearing jeans. He doubted she would ever know how he felt the moment he’d seen her on Dillon’s arm. Just knowing he was married to the beautiful woman by his side filled his heart with joy.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you looked in your wedding dress, Nadia?”

She smiled up at him. “Yes, but I’ll never get tired of your compliments, so keep them coming.”

He threw his head back and laughed. Both the wedding and reception, which had been attended by over three hundred people, had gone off

beautifully. “What’s up with Sloan’s best friend Redford St. James and Leslie’s best friend, Carmen Golan?” Jaxon asked.

Nadia chuckled. “So you noticed? Well, Carmen let it be known at Sloan and Leslie’s wedding a few years ago that she’s going to be the woman who ends Redford’s womanizing ways. Redford doesn’t intend for that to happen since he loves his life just the way it is. Usually, he tries to avoid Carmen, but it seems there was no such luck at our wedding.”

“He might be avoiding her, but I denote some interest on his part,” Jaxon said.

“Yes, but it’s I-want-to-bed-you interest and not I-want-to-wed-you interest. The latter is what Carmen wants.”

They stepped into his huge barn and when Nadia saw what he intended for her to see, she released a loud squeal. “Cocoa!”

She then raced over toward the horse. By the time Jaxon joined her she looked at him with tears in her eyes. “How did you find him? Cocoa was sold sixteen years ago,” she said, hugging the huge stallion. It was obvious the horse remembered her as well.

“It wasn’t easy. Luckily Pam knew the people he was sold to. Zane was able to track him down for me. Over the past sixteen years he’s had four owners and each one used him as a stud horse. Zane was able to locate his present owner, a rancher in North Dakota. He didn’t want to part with him until he saw how much I was willing to pay. And seeing the look on your face just now made buying him back worth it.”

“Thanks so much. I want to go riding.”

“You will but not with him, with me.”

He knew the moment she’d figured out what he meant. Releasing the horse, she turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. “That can be arranged. When do we leave for the Maldives?”

“Anytime after breakfast in the morning.”

Nadia’s smile widened. “In that case, I want a wedding night we will always remember. And I have no problem doing the riding.”

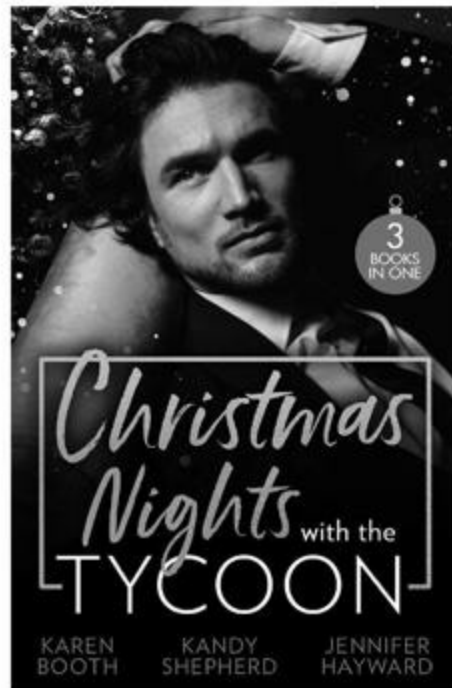
Jaxon grinned. “Tonight, we will both ride. I plan to make our wedding night as steamy as hell.”

When he swept her into his arms, she said, “Another steamy night is just what I need.”

He then carried her out of the barn toward their home.

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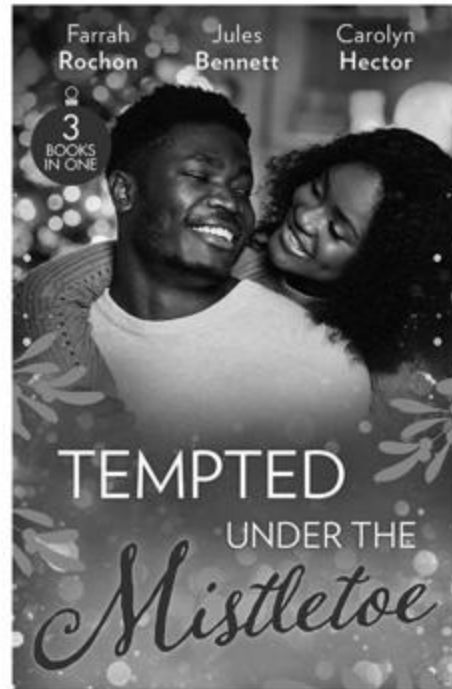
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