

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

The Bounty Hunter's Bride

SANDRA STEFFEN

Sandra Steffen

The Bounty Hunter's Bride

«HarperCollins»

Steffen S.

The Bounty Hunter's Bride / S. Steffen — «HarperCollins»,

VIRGIN BRIDES Celebrate the joys of first love with unforgettable stories by your most beloved authors. THE VIRGIN AND HER SHOTGUN GROOM Wounded bounty hunter Kane Slater had sought refuge at Josie McCoy's secluded mountain cabin. Still, the handsome loner was not about to succumb to his nurse's gentle touch. Not even when Josie told him how he could repay her for saving his life.... Because honorable men bent on remaining bachelors didn't trifle with virgins. But how could Kane convince four very angry McCoy men that he hadn't seduced their precious Josie? For they would let him off their mountain only if he took Josie as his wife! And that's how Kane Slater became a shotgun groom...to one very hopeful bride.

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“I’ve decided not to stand in your way if you want to end things.”

Kane almost fell off the fence. “You’re not?”

Josie shook her head, albeit sadly. “This was all my fault in the first place—Daddy and the boys forcing you to marry me when you didn’t...we didn’t...I still haven’t...”

Kane tried to relax, but his heart chugged to life. After that, the changes taking place elsewhere in his body made relaxing out of the question.

“I want you to know I’m sorry. I only did it because I wanted you to be my first lover. I still want you to be my first lover, but I’m not going to force anything on you that you don’t want.”

Kane didn’t know how long he’d been staring at Josie’s mouth, but as he watched her lips move, he knew she’d never have to force him to do anything. Because he suddenly found himself wanting to kiss her, long and slow and deep, over and over and over.

Dear Reader,

July brings you the fifth title of Silhouette Romance’s VIRGIN BRIDES promotion. This series is devoted to the beautiful metaphor of the traditional white wedding and the fairy-tale magic of innocence awakened to passionate love on the wedding night. In perennial favorite Sandra Steffen’s offering, *The Bounty Hunter’s Bride*, a rugged loner finds himself propositioned by the innocent beauty who’d nursed him to health in a remote mountain cabin. He resists her precious gift...but winds up her shotgun groom when her father and four brothers discover their hideaway!

Diana Whitney returns to the Romance lineup with *One Man’s Promise*, a wonderfully warmhearted story about a struggling FABULOUS FATHER and an adventurous single gal who are brought together by their love for his little girl and a shaggy mutt named Rags. And THE BRUBAKER BRIDES are back! In *Cinderella’s Secret Baby*, the third book of Carolyn Zane’s charming series, tycoon Mac Brubaker tracks down the poor but proud bride who’d left him the day after their whirlwind wedding, only to discover she’s about to give birth to the newest Brubaker heir....

Wanted: A Family Forever is confirmed bachelor Zach Robinson’s secret wish in this intensely emotional story by Anne Peters. But will marriage-jaded Monica Griffith and her little girl trust him with their hearts? Linda Varner’s twentieth book for Silhouette is book two of THREE WEDDINGS AND A FAMILY. When two go-getters learn they must marry to achieve their dreams, a wedding of convenience results in a Make-Believe Husband...and many sleepless nights! Finally, a loyal assistant agrees to be her boss’s Nine-to-Five Bride in Robin Wells’s sparkling new story, but of course this wife wants her new husband to be a permanent acquisition!

Enjoy each and every Silhouette Romance!

Regards,



Joan Marlow Golan

Senior Editor Silhouette Books

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The Bounty Hunter's Bride

Sandra Steffen



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For my sister-in-law, Rose, whose name suits her so perfectly, and who was married to my brother, Ron, for nineteen years and helped make him a lucky man. And for their children, Eric, Kurt and Kara, who are all delightful combinations of their parents. Because of the four of them, the rest of us are a little luckier, too.

SANDRA STEFFEN

Creating memorable characters is one of Sandra's favorite aspects of writing. She's always been a romantic, and is thrilled to be able to spend her days doing what she loves—bringing her characters to life on her computer screen.

Sandra grew up in Michigan, the fourth of ten children, all of whom have taken the old adage "Go forth and multiply" quite literally. Add to this her husband, who is her real-life hero, their four school-age sons who keep their lives in constant motion, their gigantic cat, Percy, and her wonderful friends, in-laws and neighbors, and what do you get? Chaos, of course, but also a wonderful sense of belonging she wouldn't trade for the world.

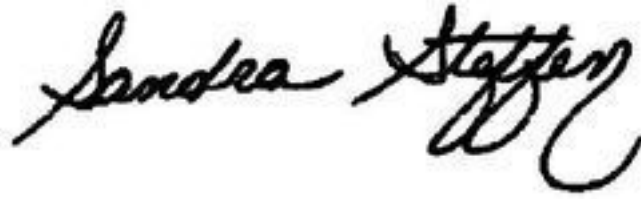
Dear Reader,

Ah, life. It's made up of thousands of firsts. First birthdays, first words, first steps, first loves. But I don't think there's a more memorable first for a man or a woman than the first time he or she makes love, for it marks the end of the innocence we call virginity, and the beginning of a person's sexual awakening. Oh, what an ending and beginning it is! Ancient civilizations held ceremonies for such occasions. Modern man's ceremonies might be more private, but in this book Josie McCoy still hears the beat of those ancient drums, still feels the heat of those fires. This feisty, witty young woman plans to make her first time memorable. Now, if she can just get her wounded, bounty-hunter husband to cooperate.

Speaking of cooperating, when my editor called and gave me the opportunity to write a book for Silhouette's VIRGIN BRIDES series, I jumped at the chance to cooperate. The Bounty Hunter's Bride is my fifteenth book for Silhouette, and while I've enjoyed writing every one, Josie's story is my favorite. For you see, when those drums started beating for Kane and Josie, I couldn't help but remember...

Here's to happy reading and happy memories!

Always,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sandra Steffen". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sandra" and the last name "Steffen" written in a connected style.

Chapter One

There was pain. There was darkness. And there was snow. Kane Slater had lost track of how long his life had consisted of those three stark realities. One hour? Four? Ten? Had there ever been anything else? He knew the sky was up. Therefore, that's where the darkness and the snow had to be coming from. The pain, on the other hand, was coming from all directions: from the sting of the wind on his face, the prickling numbness in his feet and the piercing ache in his shoulder.

He'd tracked men through higher mountains than these, in worse blizzards, but at the time he hadn't been freezing, or bleeding, or lost. Taking as deep a breath as he could without moving his shoulder a fraction more than he had to, he pulled one foot out of the deep snow and took a tortuous step.

There was pain.

He took another step. There was darkness.

He drew in another slow, careful breath. There was snow.

Pain. Darkness. Snow. Pain. Darkness. Snow. And a flickering yellow light.

A yellow light? He breathed too deeply, clutched his arm and nearly blacked out. Being more careful, he strained to see through the blinding snow. High on the next ridge, a light flickered. Maybe he could make it to that light before he died. Or maybe he was already dead and was having one of those out-of-body experiences and was being drawn up toward that light. Not likely. He had a pretty good idea which direction he was going when he died. And it wasn't up.

He'd never planned to grow old, but by God, he didn't plan to bleed to death on some nondescript little mountain in Tennessee, either. He closed his eyes. Since the light was still there when he opened them again, he concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Blasted blizzard. Blasted weakness. Blasted poor excuse for a mountain.

Josie McCoy stopped humming long enough to open the door on the woodstove and add two more logs to the glowing coals. The fire crackled and popped, the flames curling upward like a living, breathing being that gobbled up wood in exchange for blessed, glowing heat. She closed the door and latched it securely before turning in a circle inside the old hunting cabin high on a narrow bluff in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The wind whipped snow against the single windowpane. "You know Mother Nature is only doing this out of spite." She spoke out loud and—since there was no one else to talk to—to herself. Her father and the boys were probably having a good belly laugh right about now at her expense. "Go ahead and laugh," she said as if they could hear her halfway down the mountain.

The howling of the wind was her only answer. Peering out the window, Josie smiled, because it was answer enough. J.D., the brother closest to her in age, had claimed she'd never make it two whole weeks with nobody to talk to. Hah! They'd never make it two whole weeks without somebody to cook their meals and wash their clothes and haul their big feet out of the way in order to tidy the place up a little. Her father and brothers might have been mountain men, but thanks to the satellite dish on the shed's roof, the twentieth century had finally made it all the way to Hawk Hollow, Tennessee. Right on its heels had come women's lib. That's what Josie was doing. Liberating herself from those ingrates who were her closest relatives.

"Men!" she sputtered. "With their chew and whiskers and clodhopper boots. Who needs 'em?"

Closing her eyes, she ran her fingers over her face, spreading them wide into her hair, over the collar of her flannel shirt, and—slowly—down to her waist. Surely all men weren't like her father and older brothers. Surely there was one man out there—somewhere—who was tall and debonair and pleasing to the eye. And sexy. She opened only one eye and fixed it on her bed. God, yes, he would have to be sexy.

A log popped, making her jump. Shivering against a sudden draft, she folded her arms, eyed the dwindling stack of logs piled next to the stove and promptly headed for the front stoop where she'd had the good sense to heap enough firewood to make it through the night.

Bracing herself for the shock of the wind, she tugged on the latch. The door swung open with so much force it banged against the wall. A shock went through Josie, but not from the wind. A man stood on her doorstep. A big man. She didn't have time to scream. She barely had time to break the man's fall before he hit the floor, unconscious or dead, she couldn't be sure.

She put all her weight into pushing his legs out of the way so she could close the door. He groaned, and for the first time she saw that his shirt was covered in blood. Gliding down to her knees, she leaned over him and placed a hand on his chest to see if he was breathing. His chest rose slightly beneath her palm. By the time her gaze made it to his face, his eyes were open and he was watching her.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Slater. Kane. Slater." His breath caught between each word, and then, before her eyes, he lost consciousness.

"What am I supposed to do with you, Slater Kane Slater?" She lifted the soiled lapel of his sheepskin coat. Swallowing, she closed her eyes for a moment and tried to calm her churning stomach. Growing up with four older brothers, she'd seen her share of blood over the years, but this was the first time in her twenty-three years she'd seen a wound like this all the way through a man's shoulder.

"Lordy, mister," she mumbled after retrieving a threadbare towel from the table and pressing it over both sides of the wound. "I came up here to get away from the men in my life and I sure as shootin' don't need the likes of you bleeding all over my floor."

"Tracks. Snow. Got away."

His voice was harsh and raw and so unexpected that she jumped back in surprise. He let out a long, audible breath and fought against her hand that was pressed over the blood-soaked towel, as if somewhere in his befuddled mind he thought he was still in danger. The next thing she knew he'd rolled to his knees and was staggering to his feet.

Josie rose more slowly. If his eyes hadn't drilled her to the spot, she would have taken a giant step backward. He was tall. Even bleeding he was formidable. He had the face of an outlaw, four or five days' worth of whiskers, skin that looked tough and chapped. His hair was matted to his head. Clean, it would probably be light brown. His eyes were light brown, too. At the moment, they looked kind of crazed.

Gauging the distance between him and the corner where she kept a shotgun handy just in case, she said, "I hope that look in your eyes is from pain and blood loss and not because you're a lunatic. I mean, you're not an escaped prisoner or a murderer or a rapist, are you? Although I doubt that even a crazed lunatic could do much damage in your condition."

The baffled expression that crossed his features came as no surprise to Josie. All men looked at her that way every now and then. "Well?" she demanded. "Are you?"

"Never been to prison. Not a murderer or rapist." He started to sway.

Since he would be a lot easier to maneuver on his feet, she tucked her shoulder underneath his arm to steady him. She staggered beneath his weight. "Whoa, big fella." In an effort to keep him upright, she locked her spine and wrapped one arm around his waist. His arm slid limply down the front of her, the back of his hand brushing her breast.

"Don't have much in the curve department, do ya?"

This time her huff was mostly affronted pride. Slowly, jerkily, she started toward the bed on the far wall. With two more steps to go to make it to the bed, she gritted her teeth and ground out, “A gentleman would never say such a thing.”

He fell onto the lumpy mattress, the sudden jar eliciting a raw-sounding oath from his dry lips. Their gazes met, held, his throat convulsing on a swallow she assumed was from the need to cry out in pain. Instead, in a voice that was deep and shaky, he murmured, “It would be a mistake to think of me as a gentleman.”

Eyes closed, he sank into unconsciousness once again.

For what might have been the first time in her life, Josie was struck speechless. Staring at the grim line of his lips and the gray pallor of his skin, she finally said, “Just my luck. I finally have an interesting man in my bed and he’s half-dead and God only knows what side of the law he’s on.”

Wondering what on earth he’d been doing out on a night like this, she tried to decide what to do. The fresh blood soaking into his shirt propelled her into action. No matter what he’d been doing, it looked as if it was up to her to save him.

She started with his shoulder. After applying another clean towel over the entry and exit wounds of what could only be the result of a bullet, she reached for a scissors. When he groaned in his sleep, she said, “I know, I know. Bear with me for a few more minutes until I get you out of these soggy clothes.”

With shaking hands, she cut his coat and shirt away from his wounded shoulder, painstakingly sliding the wet garments from his body. The sight of a man’s bare chest was nothing new to her. Her brothers traipsed around the house without their shirts most of the summer. The McCoy boys were thin and wiry, their chests as hairy as apes. Kane Slater’s chest was broad and far from hairy, his stomach muscles forming interesting ridges that disappeared beneath the waistband of faded jeans.

“You’re a strong one, aren’t you? Well, mister, it’s a good thing because I don’t think a weaker man would have made it this far. I don’t know if it was good luck or the good Lord, but either way it looks as if it’s up to me to take it from here.”

She doubted he could hear her, but talking calmed her nerves. “Yes, indeedy, you’re gonna feel a whole lot better when we get you out of these wet clothes.”

It took her five minutes and a considerable amount of huffing and puffing to remove his soggy cowboy boots, and five more to get him out of his jeans. She hesitated a moment after that, uncertain how to go about removing his underwear without injuring his pride.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she curled her fingers beneath the elastic waistband and tugged. Other than getting stuck here and there, the garment came off without too much trouble. For some reason, her breath caught in her throat and her mind turned a little fuzzy. Something strange was taking place deep inside her. It felt a little like the flutter of butterfly wings or daisy petals ruffling on a gentle breeze. If the sensation would have settled any higher, she would have blamed it on hunger. If this was hunger, it was a kind she’d never felt before.

The stranger groaned again. Dropping the last garment of clothing to the rough plank floor, she muttered, “You’re a wicked, wicked woman, Josie McCoy. This man has lost a lot of blood and is in terrible pain and all you can think about are the changes takin’ place in your own belly.”

Without another word, she covered him with a quilt she’d warmed by the stove. He sighed, and dang if something else didn’t shift inside her.

“There, there,” she murmured. “That’s it. Let the heat soak into you. See? It’s better without the wet clothes, isn’t it? I’m afraid I ruined your shirt and coat getting ’em off you, but everything else came off real smooth. And I didn’t linger any longer than absolutely necessary.” She glanced at the shape of his body covered by the quilt, and then at the clothes heaped on the floor, thinking that as long as she never had to swear to that on a stack of bibles she’d be okay.

She kept up a quiet vigil the next several hours, talking to him in a soft, reassuring voice. At least it reassured her. The bleeding had finally stopped, and although his color wasn’t very good,

his breathing was deep and steady and he seemed to be resting more comfortably. Once every hour, she cradled his head in her arm and held a cup of cool mountain water to his lips. He drank several swallows before falling into a deep sleep once again.

Every now and then he mumbled in his sleep. Most of the time she couldn't understand what he was saying, but she answered him anyway, telling him about people he couldn't possibly know and a life he probably didn't give two hoots about. She didn't mention the butterfly wings that had fluttered deep in her stomach, but she wondered what they meant. Maybe it was excitement, or maybe it was an answer to her prayers.

A long time after midnight, his speech became less slurred and his gibberish began making more sense. Wringing out a washcloth over a pan of water she'd heated on the stove, she sat on the edge of the bed and leaned close to him. Placing one hand beside his pillow for balance, she smoothed the warm cloth over his face with long, gentle strokes.

"Warm breezes," he murmured. "Big skies. It's Montana, Ma. Good to be home."

"Montana," Josie whispered. "Home. Sleep now, Kane. Shh. Sleep."

He pressed his face into her hand, sighing as if her touch was all he needed. Josie swore her heart climbed higher in her chest and slowly turned over.

Dazedly she found her feet. She lifted the cloth away from his cheek but she couldn't seem to pull her gaze away from his face. His eyelashes were long—men had all the luck—his eyebrows were thick and straight and sandy brown in color. His nose was straight and broad, like the rest of his features. Sleeping, he looked less formidable, but not less complex. She tried to blame the changing rhythm of her beating heart on the wistfulness she'd heard in his voice. It might have worked if those butterfly wings hadn't started fluttering stronger than ever.

She took one step away from the bed and then another. Still, she didn't take her eyes off him. Placing one hand over her heart and the other low on her stomach, understanding dawned.

"So this is how it feels to be falling in love."

Funny, she'd given up on the whole prospect of love, telling herself she would settle for honest to goodness attraction. She'd had no idea the two sensations were so closely related.

"Mister," she said. "I mean, Kane, honey, it looks like this is our destiny. You're probably gonna want to repay me for saving your life. It turns out this is your lucky day, because I know exactly what you can do to make us even."

Catching sight of her grin in her reflection in the dark window, she set about getting ready for bed. She heated more water, donned a warm nightgown and thick wool socks. Finally, after tending the fire and checking on Kane one last time, she curled up on a wooden bench she'd padded with layers of blankets, and closed her eyes.

The wind was still blowing, but it had lost its roar. She could hear the crackle of the fire and the steady sound of Kane Slater's breathing. Kane Slater. She liked the way his name curled through her mind, but she wondered what kind of a man she'd fallen in love with. After all, most men didn't traipse through a blizzard with a hole in one shoulder. Kane had said he was no gentleman. What did that make him?

She pursed her lips, remembering how wistful his voice had sounded when he'd mentioned Montana and warm breezes and his mama. Surely a man who loved big sky country and his mother couldn't be all bad, although she'd read somewhere that even men on death row had a soft spot in their hearts for their mothers. Her instincts told her she would never fall in love with someone who was evil. Those instincts had always been trustworthy before. But she just didn't know. How could she? She'd never been in love before.

As far as she knew, he didn't realize he was here. It was highly likely that he didn't even know where here was. They hadn't exactly met under normal circumstances. What did she really know of him? He'd staggered into the cabin, hurt and bleeding, only to fight against the very hands that were helping him. He'd insulted her lack of curves and admitted that he was no gentleman.

Okay, she knew he was strong and gruff and wounded. Pulling the scratchy blanket up around her neck, she sighed. Closing her eyes, she hoped Kane Slater had a gentle side.

“Where in the hell are my clothes?”

Kane’s bellow brought Josie awake so quickly her vision blurred. Groggy, she sat up and glanced out the window. No wonder she was a little addle minded. The sky was just beginning to turn gray, which meant she’d been sleeping on the hard bench for less than three hours.

“I asked you a question, dammit.”

The room was chilly in the dawn’s early light, the fire awfully low. A firm believer in first things first, she swung her feet onto the cold floor and saw to the fire, thinking that Kane Slater’s gentle side—if he had one—was going to need a little work.

His rough side, on the other hand, was blatantly apparent. He was sitting up in bed, glaring at her, fresh blood soaking the bandage she’d changed hours earlier. Wrapping a woolen blanket around her shoulders like a shawl, she planted her hands on her hips and glared back. “The clothes I could salvage are over there soaking in a bucket of water. If you hold still, we might be able to get that bleeding stopped again. Or you can sit there and holler and move around until you pass out again. It’s up to you.”

Kane cradled his right arm and held very still. It took a lot to make him bite back a scathing retort. The little scrap of a woman studying her thumbnail a few feet away had done it without batting an eye. Keeping her in his line of vision, he sank into the pillows at his back and gritted his teeth against the pain shooting through him.

Doing everything in his power to focus on something other than the pain, he studied the woman. Or was she still a girl? A woman, he decided, although it was hard to tell with that blanket wrapped around her. She had straggly blond hair and plain gray eyes that were too big for her narrow face. He wondered what she would look like dressed. While he was at it, he wondered what she would look like undressed. A vague memory hovered at the edge of his mind. He glanced at the back of his hand, and then at the slight slope of her breast. The skin on his hand prickled with a message that short-circuited before it reached his brain.

“You live up here?” he asked.

With a shake of her head that sent her hair tumbling into her eyes, she said, “I live halfway down the mountain in a little town called Hawk Hollow. I came up here to be by myself. It’s lucky for you my father and brothers are such narrow-minded fools.”

Kane didn’t come close to following her logic. He didn’t see what her father and brothers had to do with him, but he supposed she was right about one thing: He was lucky he’d stumbled upon this cabin when he did. He was lucky the place had been warm, and he was lucky somebody had been here to get him into bed and make him as comfortable as possible. Although he hated to admit it, he supposed he had to admit that he was lucky to be alive.

Studying the narrowness of her shoulders and the thin body underneath the blanket and thick flannel gown, he said, “You must be stronger than you look if you managed to strip a man my size.”

“You are a big one, Kane, that’s for sure. And you’re right. I’m stronger than I look.”

Her smile hit him right between the eyes. He hadn’t realized he’d closed them until he tried to wrestle them open again.

“It’s okay, Kane,” she whispered, placing a hand on his good shoulder. “Relax. That’s it. Just rest and think about the things you like.”

Her hand was warm and narrow and surprisingly soft where it rested on his bare skin. He liked the touch of her hand, and the sound of her voice, and the way she said his name. “I’m afraid I’m at a disadvantage,” he murmured through the darkness swirling toward him from every direction.

“What disadvantage is that?” she whispered.

“You’ve seen me naked and I don’t even know your name.”

“I guess we’re just going to have to even things up a little now, aren’t we?”

His eyes popped open all by themselves. Something that had no business stirring in a dying man stirred low in Kane's body. His eyes delved hers as she tucked the quilt under his chin.

Holding his gaze, she said, "My name's Josie McCoy. You didn't really think I'd strip down right here and now; did you?"

Kane closed his eyes, wondering when his thoughts had become so transparent. "Can't blame a man for being disappointed."

"Mister. I mean Kane, I'd be disappointed if you weren't disappointed."

His mind was fogging up, making it difficult to concentrate. Just in case he didn't wake up again, he said, "I don't know if you saved my life or made dying easier. I owe you either way."

Moments before the darkness claimed him, her voice came one more time, far, far away. "I'm not going to let you die, Kane, and don't worry. I have every intention of allowing you to repay me. We might have to do a little bartering. We'll talk more when you're stronger."

Bartering? he thought, slipping into that warm, dark place where there was no pain. Images, erotic, hazy and fanciful, shimmered through his mind. Maybe he was dreaming. No, Kane Slater never dreamed.

Something told him he wasn't dying, either. And he had Josie McCoy to thank for it. There was obviously more to her than met the eye.

"You're really a modern-day bounty hunter?"

Kane did his best to keep the growl deep in his throat from escaping. He didn't nod his head for fear that the razor in Josie's hands would do serious damage to his face. Not that he would have minded a scar. It was more pain he was trying to avoid.

"Yes," he grumbled when she lifted the razor from his flesh. "That's what I said."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?" Teeth clenched, he held perfectly still as the razor made a clean pass along the edge of his jaw.

Swishing the razor in a pan of warm water, Josie said, "Why would a man who claims to have an undying devotion to the great plains and majestic mountains of Montana traipse off in the middle of the night to places unknown? Pistol drawn, you kick doors down and get lost in mountains you say aren't really mountains during blizzards and God only knows what else. My daddy always says everybody's got a reason for doing what they do. Believe me, he knows what he's talkin' about. Why?"

The razor had made four more passes down Kane's face before he'd figured out what her "why?" pertained to. This time there was no stopping the growl from erupting from his throat.

Two nights ago he'd fleetingly wondered if there might be more to Josie McCoy than met the eye. There was more to her, all right, and every last bit of it was driving him crazy. When she wasn't singing, she was talking, and when she was talking, she was usually asking questions. She asked them while she was putting wood on the fire, while she stirred something in a big pot on the stove, while she fed him warm broth and sweetened tea. Kane hated sweet tea. He hated talking and singing. He hated answering questions most of all.

He knew better than to bite the hand that fed him. His shoulder still hurt like a son of a gun, but the wound was starting to heal. It was too soon to tell if there'd been any nerve damage, but at least the bullet hadn't hit a major artery. Still, he'd lost a lot of blood, and it was going to take a while to regain his strength. God help him, he needed his strength to keep from telling Josie what she could do with her tea and her songs and her never-ending string of questions.

"Do you have people frantic with worry over you?" she asked.

"People?"

"You know. A wife, kids, parents."

The razor landed in the metal pan of water with a loud plop. Leaning back, Kane closed his eyes, listening to the scrape of the pan as she slid it away from her across the wood floor.

"No," he said. "No wife, no kids, no parents. Karl Kennedy, the head of the bail enforcement agency in Butte is probably wondering whether I'm dead or alive, but he's wondered that before and won't get real concerned for another week or two."

"Is he going to be upset that your bail jumper got away?" Josie asked.

"Not half as upset as I am. This guy wasn't just a bail jumper. He tried to kill me. Not that I'd ever be able to prove it."

"Then you didn't actually see him shoot you?"

"I got my first inkling about the same time the bullet was kissing my shoulder goodbye."

"That's not funny," she murmured, closer to his ear than he'd realized. "Here. Put this over your face for a few minutes."

She placed a hot, wet towel in his left hand and slowly lifted it to his face. Moist heat seeped into his skin, his groan turning into a deep, contented moan. "Ah, Josie, if you need something to do when you're a little older, maybe you could bring back the old-fashioned shave."

"What do you mean when I'm a little older? I'm already a grown woman. Why, back in Hawk Hollow I'm considered an old maid."

She lifted the towel from his face. He opened his eyes, fighting an unc customary urge to grin. Josie was leaning over him, her gray eyes flashing, her lips parted in indignation. She had a personality big enough for ten women, but there wasn't much to the rest of her. Her light blond hair was tied back in a lopsided ponytail. Her skin was unlined and smooth. Without a stitch of makeup, she looked about thirteen.

Shaking his head, he said, "You're not old enough to be an old maid."

"I'm twenty-three."

"You are?"

"I look younger, I, know. I think it's because I'm on the thin side. Dripping wet I barely weigh a hundred and ten."

The lift of his eyebrow must have made her feel guilty, because she said, "Okay, a hundred and five."

Kane didn't want to think about what she would look like dripping wet. He didn't want to think about the fact that she was older than she looked and therefore of legal age. He didn't want to think about how close she was and how alone they were, and, aw, hell. "Josie," he said, exasperated, "women lie about weighing too much, not too little."

"I can lie about anything I want to lie about. But I really am twenty-three. How old are you?"

Questions. Always more questions. "Thirty-four." His answer was thin and hollow and as worn as his patience.

"So, you're a thirty-four-year-old bounty hunter from Montana. No wife. No kids. No parents. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes. Maybe if he went to sleep she would stop talking.

"Well, do you?"

Then again, maybe she wouldn't. "Two brothers. Trace and Spence."

"Only two? I have four. Billy, James, Roy and J.D. They're the main reasons I came up here. That, and I wanted a little time to myself to think. Do you ever need time to yourself to think, Kane? What am I saying? You must have all kinds of time to think when you're not breaking down doors and collecting bounty money. What else do you like to do? Back in Montana, I mean. Just a minute. I'll be right back."

She bustled away to the stove where a kettle of water was beginning to boil. Kane welcomed the reprieve. All these questions were making him feel naked. Of course, he was naked.

He was a grown man, yet he'd slept like a baby most of the past two days. He hated being helpless and he hated being weak, but until his shoulder healed and he regained the use of his right arm and he was strong enough to make it down the mountain, he was at Josie's mercy. The shave,

shampoo and bath had been her idea. He was the first to admit they'd felt good, and the first to admit that he was an ornery cuss most of the time. It was an effective tool in holding people at a distance. Josie didn't seem to mind. Hell, she didn't even seem to notice.

He could tell by the soft thud of her shoes that she was nearing. Turning his head, he watched as she stopped at the edge of the ancient bathtub and promptly added the water she'd heated on the stove. Before he'd gotten in, she'd stirred some sort of healing agent into the water, making it milky white and impossible to see through. Breathing in the steam rising from the surface of the water, Kane felt himself relaxing. "Okay, Josie," he said, drowsy from the blessedly warm water. "I can take it from here."

The sound of her hand gliding through the water brought him instantly wide-awake. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Forgetting his injury, he reached blindly for her hand, only to wince in pain.

"There. See what happens when you try to do things yourself? And I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't swear. It's not as if you have anything I haven't seen before. I'm the one who got you out of your clothes the first night you were here, remember? Besides, you're not the only male I've ever seen naked. Billy's two-year-old runs around with nothing on half the time. Daddy's always yellin' for somebody to put some pants on that boy. You're gonna like my daddy. Just you wait. His name's Saxon. I swear to God I'm not making that up. Shoot. I just lost the soap. Hold on, I'll find it."

Kane was all set to tell her that in case she hadn't noticed there were a few differences between him and her two-year-old nephew, but her fingers skimmed something that most definitely was not the soap, and he forgot what he was going to say. Josie, on the other hand, didn't even miss a beat in her story.

"I have to say I don't think much of their taste in men. Why, my father and brothers want me to marry Obadiah Olson."

Deciding that for once it might be best to keep her talking until he could get things under control, he said, "Obadiah?"

"Obie for short."

"And you don't want to marry Obie?" Kane asked.

"Heavens, no."

"Do you have a reason?"

"He lies through his tooth."

Kane surprised himself by laughing. "Then what do you want? If it isn't to marry Obie and his tooth?"

She brought her hand out of the water, her thumb moving over the soap in a most tantalizing way, wiping out every last bit of progress he'd made below the water's surface. Her face was close to his, moisture clinging to her cheeks. She was on her knees, her elbows resting on the edge of the bathtub. The top two buttons of her shirt were open, awarding him a clear view of her throat and the delicate ridge of her collarbone. Lower, he could make out the outline of one perfectly shaped breast.

Without conscious thought, he lifted his left hand out of the water and slowly raised it. Her face was so close to his he could hear the sound of her breath catching in her throat. Her eyes were the color of dawn. Her lips were full and moist and unmoving.

Will wonders never cease.

He almost commented on her silence, but his hand came into contact with the soft fabric of her shirt, and he didn't feel much like talking. A heartbeat later he knew he was going to kiss her. And then his mouth was covering hers. Her lips were warm and soft and the tiniest bit trembly. She kissed him back, but tentatively, as if she wasn't sure what to do. Kane couldn't remember the last time he'd kissed a woman who didn't take over, who didn't push for more, who simply seemed to savor what was happening at that very moment.

It was a heady sensation, one that wiped out all but the last shreds of coherent thought. Burying his fingers in the loose fabric at her throat, he finally drew away slightly, ending the kiss.

A man had to be careful what he said at a time like this, because there wasn't a lot of blood left above his shoulders. Breathing deeply, he murmured, "I feel a little sorry for poor Obie."

The air whooshed out of Josie, the area surrounding her heart turning to mush. She'd been experiencing those butterfly sensations on and off for two days, but she'd been questioning the possibility that she could really have fallen in love with a man she barely knew. She'd begun to wonder if she'd imagined her feelings for him. She wasn't imagining them now.

She'd known Kane was looking inside her shirt. If he'd been any other man, her first instinct would have been to cover herself. But Kane wasn't any other man, and she'd held her breath, waiting. When his hand had come out of the water, those old butterflies had fluttered in anticipation of his touch. Rather than touching her breast, he'd kissed her, drawing the lapels of her shirt together at the same time. He might have claimed he was no gentleman, but she knew differently. And she knew, without a doubt, that her love for him was real, which brought her to the brink of what she wanted to say.

Lathering up the washcloth, she smoothed it over his left shoulder, slowly moving it across his chest. His muscles flexed beneath her hand, his voice little more than a husky rasp as he said, "I'll take it from here, Josie. You've already done more than I'll ever be able to repay."

She relinquished the washcloth to him, saying, "I've been wanting to talk to you about that, Kane."

His eyes narrowed, his hand stilling. "About what?"

She cleared her throat and swallowed the knot that had formed around her voice box. "About repaying me."

"You want money?"

She shook her head. "No. But there is something you can do."

"And what might that be?" His voice had taken on an ominous ring in the silent room.

She'd been rehearsing this for two and a half days. Suddenly she didn't know how to begin. Calling on the angels for courage, she looked directly into his eyes and said, "I've been dreaming of getting off this mountain for as long as I can remember. If what you said is true and you want to repay me, I'd like you to take me with you back to Montana. I could do almost anything you asked. I'm a virgin, but I'm a fast learner."

Chapter Two

"You're a what?"

Kane yelled too loud and moved too fast. One hurt his eardrums and the other sent pain shooting through his shoulder. He didn't care. It beat the wounded look crossing Josie's face that very instant.

"I'm a fast learner," she said, lowering her eyes.

That wasn't what he'd asked her to repeat. She'd said she was a virgin. Come to think of it, he didn't want her to repeat it. Once had been enough.

Other than a log snapping on the fire, the room was more quiet than he'd ever heard it. Too quiet. He tried to remember some of the things his older brother had said after he'd hurt his wife's feelings. Spence wasn't very good at making amends. Hell, Kane was worse. "Look," he said. "You're young and—" he swallowed "—innocent, but you don't even know me."

"I know I love you."

"You know you—" The blood flow to the lower half of his body came to a screeching halt, right after the blood flow stopped to his brain. It was a good thing Kane had steady instincts. Otherwise he never would have caught the slight hand that was inching dangerously close to certain anatomical parts that would respond no matter what his brain said.

"No, Josie."

Round gray eyes stared into his. "What do you mean no?"

“I mean,” he ground out, “I live alone. I work alone. I travel alone. And I’ll die alone.”

“But you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do.” Without another word, he clutched the side of the old claw-foot bathtub with his good hand and pushed to his feet. Water sluiced down his body. Being careful to keep his back to Josie, he reached for a threadbare towel. He felt a little dizzy, but he managed to keep the towel firmly in front of him as he stepped down to the floor.

She was still watching him, still speechless. Wisps of light blond hair had escaped the band on the back of her head, damp tendrils curling over her ears and forehead. She was wearing blue jeans, hiking boots with thick wool socks and a gray-and-blue flannel shirt. He could see the outline of her breasts and the dime-size circle in the center of each of them. Kane had no business noticing, no business responding. And she had no business looking good in that kind of outfit.

Suddenly she moved toward him, her hands reaching around him, drawing the ends of the towel together at his side. Her fingers shook slightly as she tucked the edges underneath. Slowly she raised her gaze to his. “There’s plenty of time to think about it, Kane.”

Kane was struck speechless all over again. He thought he’d faced the biggest shock of his life when that bullet had sliced through him three days ago. It had been a week of firsts. That had been the first time he hadn’t been able to dodge a bullet, and this was the first time anyone had offered him a virgin sacrifice.

“I don’t need to think about it, dammit. I already told you I live alone. Besides, you’re too young and too skinny.”

Josie felt the floor shake as he stomped away. His words might have hurt her feelings, if she hadn’t caught a glimpse of—what was it her mama used to say? The proof is in the pudding. Whether Kane Slater knew it or not, she’d seen living proof that he didn’t find her nearly as repulsive as he claimed.

While he banged around on the other side of the one-room cabin, tugging on his own clean jeans and shrugging into the makeshift sling she’d concocted from one of her brothers’ shirts, she drained the bathtub and tidied the place up a little.

He swore loudly and often. Josie let him cuss. His orneriness didn’t faze her. Good heavens, she was closely related to five of the grouchiest men on the planet. She’d always wanted a sister, but now she was beginning to think it had been a good thing she’d been exposed to so many grumpy men. She’d been educated by the best. Consequently she shouldn’t have too much trouble dealing with Kane’s ornery side.

She loved him. She was sure of it now. That made this serious.

She’d thought it would never happen to her. And yet here she was, sitting in a quiet cabin on a quiet mountain, her heart brimming with quiet emotions that simply refused to settle down. She loved a man from Montana, a man who’d risked his life and who claimed he needed no one. No matter what he said, he seemed more lonely than loner.

Fishing the soap out of the bottom of the bathtub, she reminded herself that Kane was very, very stubborn. It just so happened that she held the title for that one. A few years ago she’d gone on strike, refusing to cook meals for her brothers and wash their dirty clothes. All because she’d gotten sick and tired of their slovenly ways and lack of manners. At first they’d been downright snide about their refusal to change, but when they were hungry enough and smelly enough, they’d given in. Oh, they were still a little on the slovenly side, but at least now they said “thank you” when she served them their supper and “excuse me” when they belched.

Luckily Kane wasn’t slovenly or rude. She was just going to have to find a way to win him over to her way of thinking. Food had been the straw that had broken her brothers’ backs. Remembering the way Kane had kissed her and what that kiss had done to his body set off a new round of flutters deep in her belly. Something told her that in order to win Kane over, she was going to have to whet his appetite. Not necessarily for food.

She hummed to herself while she added a log to the fire. By the time she'd added carrots and celery to the venison roast she was cooking in the oven, she had broken out in song. Casting a surreptitious glance at Kane, her tune trailed away. He was stretched out on the bed, one leg dangling over the side. Evidently he hadn't been able to manage the shirt on his own. He'd given up, an arm in one sleeve, his other shoulder and arm bare. Eyes closed, he looked pale, his chest rising and falling evenly.

Pressing one hand over her mouth and the other over her heart, she thought, He's beautiful in repose. Striding closer, she imagined herself watching him sleep thirty years from now, thinking the same thing. Of course, he would be older, his face more lined, his body a little thicker. But his chest would still be as broad, his jaw as square, his lips as enticing. She would have liked the freedom to kiss each of those features.

Someday, she told herself. First she had to get to know him better, to become familiar with the little quirks that made up his personality. She wanted to figure out what it took to make him smile and what was behind the low rumbling sound he made deep in his throat.

Covering him with the quilt, she whispered, "Rest now, Kane. You're going to need all your strength for what I have in store for us."

She glanced around the sparsely furnished room before strolling to the window. Outside, the wind had piled the snow in huge drifts, some of them reaching all the way to the branches on trees. She'd uncovered most of the woodpile and had shoveled a path to the outhouse, but the rest of the area was untouched.

The sky was a vivid blue, the sun glinting off the white surface, causing her to squint. It was almost April, and the sun was already trying to melt the snow. Wondering how much longer she would have before Kane insisted he was strong enough to make it down the mountain, she decided she'd better not waste any time. She would begin winning him over as soon as he woke up from his nap.

"I've never even seen Graceland. Can you believe that? Opryland, either, for that matter." Head tipped over, Josie smoothed the brush over her damp hair with long, slow strokes. She couldn't see much beyond the square of floor directly in front of her. Therefore, she couldn't tell if Kane was listening to her or not. It wouldn't be the first time she'd found herself talking to herself when she'd thought she was talking to him. Resigning herself to the possibility, she said, "I guess there are a lot of things I haven't seen in this great big old world."

"You should try to get out of the house once in a while."

She felt her eyebrows go up. "Get out of the house," she repeated, encouraged by his attention. "I get out of the house every day. I just don't get very far in my travels. A storytelling festival takes place in Jonesboro every October. J.D. and Billy tried to get me to go there to spin my tales one year."

"You didn't go?"

"Nah. I'd rather talk to folks I know. I mosey on up to Picket Pass to talk to Nellie Peters every morning after breakfast. Minerva Jones says she can set her clock by me. That woman really appreciates punctuality...."

Kane shifted in the hard-back chair, trying to get comfortable and trying not to notice the way Josie's hair swished with every stroke of her brush. Two days had passed since she'd made her suggestion regarding the method of repayment for all her help. Although she'd talked about everything else under the sun, she hadn't mentioned her, er, virginity again. He squirmed, scowling, because he'd thought about it a hundred times. Her hair crackled; his fingers flexed, his imagination picturing those silken tresses gliding over his skin.

He jerked to his feet.

Jerking to his feet wasn't wise with a sore shoulder. The pain was his own stinking fault. Actually the pain was the fault of the bail jumper who'd shot him. Okay, then the desire shooting through him was his own fault. He knew exactly what to do about it. As soon as he was miles and miles away from here, he'd find a warm and willing woman.

There was a warm, willing woman in this very room.

He swung around fast, swearing out loud at the new shooting pain. Josie was so busy talking she hadn't heard.

"...If I'm not careful I'll end up like Edwina Gilson..."

Talking. Talking. Josie was always talking. She talked while she fixed meals. She'd even talked while she took her bath a little while ago. Kane had kept his back to her the whole time, commending himself on his willpower. Still, every splash had been sheer torture. He was getting worked up all over again just thinking about it. For crying out loud, he didn't even like skinny women.

"...She's seventy-three, and she's never set foot off this mountain."

Pacing to the bed, he reached for what was left of his sheepskin coat and grouched, "You call this a mountain?"

Josie went perfectly still. In her efforts to win Kane over, she'd tried being nice. Kane Slater was not an easy man to be nice to. He wasn't an easy man, period. She'd just about used up the last of her patience.

With a toss of her head that sent her hair cascading down her back and around her shoulders, she planted her hands, hairbrush and all, on her hips, and glared at him. "I'm sick and dam tired of all your disparaging comments about my mountain. I don't know what you have against the Blue Ridge Mountains, but they are so mountains. It says so in the encyclopedia. And there's nothing wrong with Tennessee, either. Why, Davy Crockett grew up here, and three United States presidents lived in Tennessee. Don't 'spose you know which ones."

Feeling her blood pressure starting to climb, she took a step toward him. "James Polk and the two Andrews—Jackson and Johnson. I've never seen the mountains in Montana, but if they're anywhere near as big as the chip on your shoulder, they must be huge."

She stared at him across the ensuing silence. Nostrils flaring, he glared back at her, and then, out of the blue, he turned his back on her. She did not understand him. Worse, she simply couldn't seem to get a handle on what made him tick. He never reacted to the same situation the same way twice. He yelled, swore or withdrew, in no particular order.

Crossing her arms, she sighed. "What makes the mountains in Montana so special, Kane?"

Kane felt a jolt run through him, yet his feet seemed to be frozen to the floor. Staring at the rough-sawn walls and the bed and the age-old cupboard nearby, he found himself saying, "It's not just the mountains. It's the sky and the air and the way the land stretches toward the horizon as far as the eye can see. Some mornings, it's quiet enough to hear the break of day."

He hadn't been aware that he'd turned around until he saw her lips part and her chest rise with the deep breath she took. She smiled, and his body reacted all over again. In a voice gone soft and gentle, she said, "Quietude isn't something people around me get a lot of."

It took him a full five seconds to drag his gaze away from her smile, but it was the desire thrumming through him that finally brought him to his senses. Heart pounding, he jerked around and tried to put on his coat.

She was there all of a sudden, reaching out with a helping hand, tsk, tsk, tsking about his language. She smelled like shampoo and soap and woman. Placing an iron grip on his resolve, he moved out of her reach. "I can do it myself."

Josie watched him struggle to get the coat over his sore shoulder. He reminded her of a raccoon she'd come across years ago during one of her treks up to Witches Peak. The animal had been stuck in a trap fifteen feet off the beaten path. He was in agony, and would have chewed his own leg off in order to be free, and yet he'd snapped and snarled every time she'd tried to get close enough to help. She'd ended up covering him with her thick coat until she'd managed to open the trap. Free, he'd growled at her until he'd disappeared into the bushes.

Turning on her heel, she strode to the corner where she kept her father's twelve-gauge, thinking, Some creatures simply didn't have it in them to be appreciative.

“What are you doing?”

Gun in hand, she glanced at Kane, who was watching her, obviously unnerved and uncertain of what she was going to do. She pulled a face and sputtered, “I’ve spent the last five days nursing you back to health. I’ve put up with your cussing and your grumbling and your ornery tendencies. Do you really think I’d shoot you now? Not that you don’t deserve it.”

Kane glanced from the long barreled shotgun in Josie’s hand to the anger flashing in her eyes. “Then what are you going to do with that gun?”

He heard her loud sigh all the way from the other side of the room. “I brought enough food with me to last me three weeks, at least, but I wasn’t expecting company. For an injured man, you eat like a horse.”

Trusty shotgun in hand, she stomped out into the snow to try to rustle up something to eat for supper.

Josie dropped a handful of baby onions into the pot then leaned over to add wood to the fire. She might have closed the door with a little more force than was necessary, but she couldn’t help it. She considered herself a reasonable woman, but she was close to reaching the end of her rope. She’d spent two and a half hours outside. A person would think all the energy she’d exerted trudging through snowdrifts would have alleviated her anger a little.

Very little.

She’d done a lot of walking and she’d done a lot of thinking, which had led to a lot of soul-searching. She didn’t question her feelings for Kane. She questioned her good sense. Adding potatoes and carrots to the bubbling stew, she muttered under her breath. “I’ve tried everything I could think of to bring out that man’s gentler side and what does he do? Practically accuses me of wantin’ to shoot him. Why, if I wanted to shoot him I woulda done it by now. If he wasn’t so thickheaded and stubborn he’d know that all I want is to get to know him. I’ve tried being nice. The nicer I am, the grouchier he gets.”

She was still sputtering an hour later. Huffing, she reminded herself that she didn’t have to take this kind of abuse. Not from her father and brothers. Not from the man she’d been stupid enough to fall in love with. Until he gave her a sign, she was done being nice to him. That decided, she carried two chipped bowls and mismatched cups to the table.

On the other side of the room, Kane grimaced and ducked his head slightly. Amazed that neither of the shallow bowls had broken beneath the force with which Josie had clanked them onto the worn wooden table, he measured her with a long, appraising look.

She’d stomped the snow off her boots and had come inside almost two hours ago. Although she hadn’t said a word to him, she’d talked to herself pretty much nonstop. She was wearing another flannel shirt, this one yellow and green. Instead of buttoning it, she’d left it open, revealing a plain white shirt that clung to her thin body.

Ambling closer, he said, “My mother used to sputter like that under her breath, too. I’d forgotten until now.”

She looked at him over her shoulder. “Something tells me you gave your mother a lot to sputter about.”

Kane shrugged his good shoulder. “What’s for supper?”

She waited a good, long time before answering. “Rabbit stew.”

Kane strode a little closer. Stomach rumbling, he sniffed the air. She’d been gone two hours before he’d heard the first shot. The second shot had come from someplace closer half an hour later. He’d tried not to watch the clock, he’d tried to sleep and he’d tried to tell himself that the reason he couldn’t seem to do either had nothing to do with a guilty conscience.

Kane Slater may have been a lot of things, but he was no liar. He’d screwed up, plain and simple. He’d been ornery, mean and inconsiderate. She’d nursed him back to health, sharing her warm cabin and her food. And what had he done? Treated her unkindly.

“I’m sorry, Josie.”

Josie turned around slowly. Kane was looking at her, one arm cradled in the makeshift sling, the other hanging limply at his side. He seemed as surprised by his apology as she was.

“I should have thought. I should have realized. And I should have thanked you,” he said, hesitating as if he’d had to dredge the words from a place deep inside him.

She tried to hold a grudge, really she did, but she didn’t have it in her to stay angry at this man. She’d hoped he had a gentle side. Like the tip of an iceberg, she was glimpsing it now.

“I know it’s no excuse,” he said. “But I’m not used to all this inactivity. Sitting around is driving me crazy.”

She studied him thoughtfully for several seconds. He’d had another bath that morning, but this time he’d insisted upon doing everything himself. The nick in his chin was the result of shaving with his left hand. Other than that, he’d managed quite well. His light brown hair was clean, the color of his skin more healthy looking. He’d come to her injured and bleeding. The flicker of emotion way in the back of his eyes made her think that his shoulder hadn’t been his most serious wound. The realization was dredged from a place beyond logic and reason, a place where there were only shimmery emotions and yearnings older than time.

He’d told her, in no uncertain terms, that he didn’t want or need anybody. Need was a funny thing. It could hide deep inside a person, going undetected for years, until one day you noticed it squeezing into your thoughts, into your sighs, into your soul. Kane might not have realized it yet, but he needed a woman’s softness, a woman’s gentleness, a woman’s strength. Not just any woman’s. He needed hers.

Going back to her stew, she said, “Apology accepted. And you’re welcome. Now, I hope this stew gets done soon. There’s nothing like trailing a potential supper for hours to give me an appetite.”

She handed him the silverware and told him to make himself useful. She noticed he set the table restaurant style, the fork on the left, spoon and knife on the right. Somebody had taught him manners. Feeling suddenly buoyant, she smiled and said, “It was beautiful out there today. I don’t understand what you don’t like about the Blue Ridge Mountains. They’re just so pretty. Did you know that on a clear day you can see seven states from Lookout Mountain?”

Kane shook his head and lowered onto a straight-back chair. Barely taking enough time to draw a deep breath, Josie continued. “Tennessee is called the big bend state. Wanna know why?”

Kane shrugged. Sure, why not? He was getting used to listening to her stories.

“Because,” she said, her long wooden spoon sending steam wafting from the pot of bubbling stew. “The Tennessee River bends in the middle and flows through the state twice. Bubba Jones told me that in the third grade. He went to Texas to be a rodeo champion. He couldn’t hit a bull in the butt with a bass fiddle, let alone ride one, but he ended up marrying a rich widow from Portland, Oregon way. Strange how some things work out, isn’t it?”

Kane stared across the small room. He felt dizzy. That happened a lot when he tried to make sense of what Josie said.

She talked on, telling him about people he’d never heard of and places he never planned to go. He glanced up in surprise when she placed the pot of stew on the table and began ladling a healthy portion into his bowl. Breathing in the mouthwatering aroma, he said, “I can’t believe there are still women alive who can shoot supper, clean it, dress it, cook it and still have the stomach to eat it after all that.”

She dropped onto a chair opposite him and scooped up a spoonful of stew. “It’s given me a good understanding of why some people become vegetarians. They say they can’t eat the flesh of living creatures. Plants were alive, too, once. How do we know they don’t have feelings? I once read that there’s an entire segment of our population that talks to their roses and tomatoes and whatnot. I think the human race has to eat something, don’t you?”

Kane stared across the table, spoon poised in midair.

“What?” she asked.

“Oh,” he said, lowering his spoon to his bowl, “I was just thinking that you’re really nothing like I expected a mountain woman to be.”

“And how’s that?”

Waiting to answer until after he’d taken his first bite of supper, he said, “Bear in mind that what little knowledge I have of mountain people is based on Beverly Hillbillies reruns.”

“I’m definitely no Granny, and I’m afraid I’m not built like Elly May.”

“You don’t wear a bra.” He clamped his mouth shut. Where had that come from?

Her smile set his teeth on edge. “There’s something to be said for small breasts, isn’t there?”

He groaned inwardly, his gaze straying below her shoulders. There was something to be said for her small breasts. Dragging his gaze away from the gentle slopes evident through the white fabric of her shirt, he cleared his throat and took another bite of stew. He tried not to think about kissing her taut nipples, tried not to wonder if he would be the first.

It was lucky for him that she didn’t seem to mind keeping up a one-sided conversation. Funny, a few days ago he hadn’t thought there was anything lucky about it. A few days ago he hadn’t felt a surging desire when he least expected it. A few days ago he hadn’t eaten two bowls of rabbit stew without tasting any of it.

She didn’t look at him again until her bowl was empty. Only then did her gaze meet his from the other side of the table. She smiled, and he felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. He did his best to return her grin, but it wasn’t easy, when what he wanted to do was vault over the table and kiss her the way he had the other day in the bath.

“Had enough?” she asked.

Enough? Oh, enough stew. “Yes. Plenty. Thanks.”

“Then we’d better get to it.”

He gulped. “It?”

“You said you’re going stir-crazy. The activity will be good for you.”

Activity? Something intense flared through him, something he wasn’t certain he’d ever felt in exactly this way. It was the knowledge that she was a virgin. It messed with a man’s head, making him think about the darnedest things. It took the simplicity out of a man wanting a woman. And Kane believed in keeping things simple.

“Come on, Kane, let’s dance.”

“Dance? That’s what you want to do...dance?”

“What did you think?”

Since Kane wasn’t about to admit what he’d been thinking, he said, “There’s no music.”

She started to hum. Seconds later she broke out into song. Lord, there she went with the singing again.

“Come on, Kane,” she said, drawing him with her to the center of the room.

“I can’t dance,” he said, stalling.

Totally undeterred, she placed his good hand on her shoulder and his other one on her waist, talking all the while. “I’ve watched every Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie ever made a hundred times. I can teach even a mule with four left feet to dance.”

She hummed a few bars of the “Tennessee Waltz.”

“Josie, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Don’t worry,” she whispered, inching closer. “I’ll be real careful of your bad shoulder. There, how’s that?”

She started humming again, swaying slightly, easing him into his first step. “Dancin’ ain’t— isn’t—hard. It’s like playing leapfrog or making love.”

He swallowed, his feet moving him around the room, her voice sending his thoughts to the other side of the moon. "It's all about trust and consent, about swaying this way and dipping that way. You hold me just so. And I hold you just so. There. Feel that?"

Kane felt that, all right. He felt her breasts against his chest and her hair under his chin. He felt her breath on his neck and her thighs between his. He felt a lot more than he cared to admit. It left him warm and wanting, and he didn't want to stop.

Deciding for once it might be best to keep her talking, he said, "Would you tell me something, Josie?"

She looked up at him and nodded, continuing to hum.

"I was just wondering why a girl who can sing like a lark and glide around the room on feet that don't even touch the ground has stayed on this mountain," he said, pausing for quiet emphasis. He really was trying to be nice. "I mean, why would a girl like you stay if you aren't happy here?"

She stared into his eyes for a moment, and then past him as if she was seeing something in the distance only she could see. He watched her expression, intrigued.

"What makes you think I'm not happy here?" she asked.

"Are you?"

She shrugged. "I'm not unhappy, if that's what you mean. Some kids don't like school, but I loved it, especially geography and reading. My mama couldn't read very well, but she was so proud of me. I used to talk to her for hours about the people and places I read about and how I was going to visit each and every corner of the world."

"Why haven't you?" he said quietly.

She lifted her chin, her eyes finding his. Their feet continued to move, but their steps took them in a circle that grew smaller and smaller. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Mama got sick when I was fourteen. I missed a lot of school after that. By the time she died, I was seventeen, and Daddy didn't see much sense in sending me back."

Kane had the feeling that for once, Josie was leaving a lot out. A lot of pain. A lot of sadness. A lot of hopelessness. A ton of disappointment. "It's never too late," he said.

"To go back to school? Maybe not in other parts of the country, but in Hawk Hollow, it's way too late. That's why I was hoping to convince you to take me to Montana with you. I'd try to be quiet, Kane. I'm a good cook and a fair to middling housekeeper. And don't all men need a woman every now and then?"

Kane's feet froze to the floor, his hand tightening at her waist.

"Kane?"

There was something in her voice that struck a chord in his heart. Until that instant, he didn't know he still had a heart.

All he had to do was make the next move, and he would find relief for the pent-up need wreaking havoc with his senses. He thought about it. God, it was torture, but he couldn't do it. It seemed that along with a heart came a conscience.

Ending the little dance lesson, he touched her cheek first, and then he straightened her collar. "I'm tempted, Josie. Believe me, I'm tempted. But a girl like you can do a lot better than a man like me."

"You're wrong about that, Kane."

He shook his head, thinking about Obadiah Olson and his tooth. "Maybe not here, but somewhere. You should do whatever you want to do and be whatever you want to be."

He hoped he hadn't hurt her feelings too much, and prepared himself for her tongue-lashing and tirade. Neither came. She simply stared at him for several seconds before turning away. He wasn't entirely comfortable with her silence, but the sparkle in her eyes made him downright suspicious.

Chapter Three

That sparkle was still in Josie's eyes three days later. And Kane was still suspicious. He'd been practicing the fine art of holding the opposite sex at bay for years. Women in general didn't make it easy. Josie was more difficult than most.

Now that he was stronger, he'd put a stop to her offers to lend a helping hand. He bathed himself, dressed himself, even took his turn cleaning up after breakfast, lunch and supper. There had been no more dance lessons, no more anything lessons. Every once in a while he'd detected what he'd thought was a waning on her part. He was pretty sure she'd given up completely when he'd turned down her far-from-innocent ploy to play strip poker earlier that morning. Now, she seemed more intent upon asking questions than luring him into bed. It was a hard call, but when push came to shove, Kane believed it was far easier to answer her questions than deter her amorous overtures.

"I don't get it," she said, studying the checkerboard between them. "If you want to catch bad guys, why not become a police officer? King me."

Kane turned her checker over dazedly. Studying his next move, he said, "In this age of attorneys and individual rights, police officers' hands are tied. Besides, police departments don't have the time or the resources to chase missing suspects down."

"By resources, you mean money," she said.

At his nod, she asked, "How much does it cost to capture one of these fugitives?"

Kane lifted his gaze from the board, only to find Josie's eyes down-turned. "The average fee for taking a fugitive off the street is five hundred dollars. High profile cases can net anywhere from ten to eighty thousand dollars for an arrest. Those are my specialty."

She shrugged as if thoroughly unimpressed. "Is that why you do it? For the money?"

He shook his head. "I do it because somebody has to. And because I'm good at it. I have a good head on my shoulders and I've learned how a wanted fugitive thinks."

"Have you ever killed anybody?"

That was a question a lot of people asked. Sliding his black checker to the next square, he shook his head. "In the old days a bounty hunter would track and corner his prey. More often than not the confrontation ended in gunfire. It's much safer today."

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