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January

LINDA GOODNIGHT

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SOMETIMES
WHEN WE KISS

Linda Goodnight

Sometimes When We Kiss

«HarperCollins»

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LONG-LOST HUSBAND RETURNS...Shannon Wyoming thought she'd seen the last of rugged rancher Jackson Kane when he walked away from her teenaged heart ten years ago. Now, like something out of a dream—or a nightmare—Jackson was back, looking better than ever and proposing a marriage of convenience from which they'd both benefit. Although past experience screamed for her to refuse, Shannon didn't listen...but she should have. Because one kiss on the altar brought back all the memories she'd desperately tried to bury and their one-year deal seemed like it would last an eternity. Especially once she discovered the one marital repercussion neither of them had counted on...

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“What if I could find a husband for you, a man who would agree to a marriage short-term, while Gus gets back on his feet?”

Shannon’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

Jackson swallowed. Was he? “Yeah.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

She jumped up and was out the door in record time. She needed air. She needed a clear head. And what she didn’t need was the black-eyed Cajun following her.

“Gee, Shannon,” Jackson said as he caught up to her. “You sure know how to make a guy feel good about his proposal.”

“That wasn’t a proposal, that was a—” She gulped past the confusion in her throat.

“What scares you more, Shannon? That you won’t be able to pretend you love me? Or that you never stopped loving me to begin with?”

Dear Reader,

Whether you’re enjoying one of the first snowfalls of the season or lounging in a beach chair at some plush island resort, I hope you’ve got some great books by your side. I’m especially excited about the Silhouette Romance titles this month as we’re kicking off 2006 with two great new miniseries by some of your all-time favorite authors.

Cara Colter teams up with her daughter, Cassidy Caron, to launch our new PERPETUALLY YOURS trilogy. In *Love’s Nine Lives* (#1798) a beautiful librarian’s extremely possessive tabby tries to thwart a budding romance between his mistress and a man who seems all wrong for her but is anything but. Teresa Southwick returns with *That Touch of Pink* (#1799)—the first in her BUY-A-GUY trilogy. When a single mom literally buys a former military man at a bachelor auction to help her daughter earn a wilderness badge, she gets a lot more than she bargained for...and is soon earning points toward her own romantic survival badge. Old sparks turn into an all-out blaze when the hero returns to the family ranch in *Sometimes When We Kiss* (#1800) by Linda Goodnight. Finally, Elise Mayr debuts with *The Rancher’s Redemption* (#1801) in which a widow, desperate to help her sick daughter, throws herself on the mercy of her commanding brother-in-law whose eyes reflect anything but the hate she’d expected.

And be sure to come back next month for more great reading, with Sandra Paul’s distinctive addition to the PERPETUALLY YOURS trilogy and Judy Christenberry’s new madcap mystery.

Have a very happy and healthy 2006.

Ann Leslie Tuttle

Associate Senior Editor

Sometimes When We Kiss

Linda Goodnight



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Books by Linda Goodnight

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Rich Man, Poor Bride #1742

The Least Likely Groom #1747

Sometimes When We Kiss #1800

LINDA GOODNIGHT

A romantic at heart, Linda Goodnight believes in the traditional values of family and home. Writing books enables her to share her certainty that, with faith and perseverance, love can last forever and happy endings really are possible.

A native of Oklahoma, Linda lives in the country with her husband, Gene, and Mugsy, an adorably obnoxious rat terrier. She and Gene have a blended family of six grown children. An elementary school teacher, she is also a licensed nurse. When time permits, Linda loves to read, watch football and rodeo, and indulge in chocolate. She also enjoys taking long, calorie-burning walks in the nearby woods. Readers can write to her at linda@lindagoodnight.com, or c/o Silhouette Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279.

To Western artist and horse trainer Nadine Meade
for inspiration, advice and just plain old
being a good neighbor.

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Chapter One

Riding a horse was like riding a bicycle. If you fell off, you had to get right back on again.

Backhanding the dirt from her eyes, Shannon Wyoming stuck one booted foot into the stirrup, grabbed the saddle horn and vaulted onto one of the few horses that did not understand that she could—and would—break him to ride.

Never mind that her backside would be black and blue, Shannon never allowed anything to get the best of her.

For one glorious moment Shannon thought she had finally succeeded, that Domino's stubborn spirit had broken. He crow-hopped across the sunlit arena, all four legs stiff, back arched higher than a Halloween cat as he bounced. Crow-hopping was a piece of cake to an experienced trainer like Shannon. No problem. He'd settle down in a minute.

Fifteen seconds into the ride, Domino changed tactics. His hind legs shot out behind him and the bronc went into a wild bucking exposition that would have unseated a rodeo champ. When Shannon leaned back to compensate, he yanked his head down hard, unbalancing her. One more wild gyration and she flew off with all the projection of a human cannonball, but with considerably less grace.

She landed facedown, the hard-packed dirt of the arena knocking the breath from her. No belly buster from a rope swing at Coyote Creek ever hurt this bad.

She lay there in the Texas sun with not a desire in the world to get up, hoping breath would return before her heart stopped. Domino, as she well knew, wouldn't come anywhere near for a while. He was likely in the corner of the lot, sulking.

Gnats buzzed around her ears and one pesky horsefly threatened to add insult to injury, so she had to get up. She sucked in a mouthful of arena dirt, then opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was a pair of dusty, well-worn boots—snakeskin boots—crossed at the ankle in a posture of total relaxation. Equally worn blue jeans, made long the way cowboys like them, bunched softly atop the brown boots.

Great. She'd not only been thrown like a greenhorn, but she had a witness to verify her humiliation.

Stifling an inward groan that had as much to do with her unwanted visitor as with her state of breathlessness, Shannon pushed up from the ground. She slapped at her jeans and shirt, loosing a dust storm that obscured her vision and threatened her already tortured air passages. She wiped a dirty sleeve across her face and squinted toward the fence rail where a cowboy leaned, indolently watching her.

Every nerve in Shannon's body sprang to full alert. A lightning strike would not have shocked her more.

Jackson Kane. When had he come back to Rattlesnake? And what was he doing here, on her ranch, where he was not a welcome guest?

He didn't look much different than he had the last time she'd seen him, though her carefully preserved pride would not let her go there again, even in memory. Tall and wide-shouldered, his dark and sexy looks still did funny things to her insides and infuriated her to the point of rudeness. She didn't want to talk to him, even now, didn't want to notice the way his incredibly sexy mouth wallowed a narrow piece of straw, didn't want to notice the new age lines around his Cajun black eyes.

But she noticed. Darn it. She noticed.

"What do you want?" She slammed her hands on her hips in a fit of annoyance.

He grinned then, slow and lazy and insolent, as if he knew how much he affected her by showing up out of the blue after all this time.

Taking the straw from between his teeth, he studied her long enough to set her heart to racing and to send the heat of a blush creeping up her neck.

He aimed the piece of straw at her, and she saw then that what she'd thought was straw was actually a tiny lollipop.

She burst out laughing. "A Dum-Dum sucker. How appropriate."

He pushed off the fence and strutted toward her in that loose-hipped, rolling gait of a man who'd spent plenty of time on a horse and was comfortable in his own skin. Digging in his shirt pocket, he extracted another candy and thrust it toward her. "Want one?"

She eyed the treat with suspicion. "Your idea of a peace offering?"

"Do I need a peace offering?"

She snatched the sucker from his outstretched hand. "It'll take more than this."

One side of his mouth kicked up and a dimple deep enough to swim in winked at her. "Then give it back."

Like the kid she'd been when Jackson Kane had broken her heart and left her with enough guilty regrets to last a lifetime, Shannon ripped off the paper and shoved the sucker into her mouth. A burst of syrupy cherry didn't do a thing to sweeten her mood.

"Some things, once taken, can't ever be given back, Jackson, or had you forgotten?"

Her jibe wiped the grin off his face. Good. She didn't want him having fun at her expense. Not anymore. Because the things she'd given him—and lost because of him—were far too painful to joke about.

Spinning away from his disturbing presence, Shannon searched for her hat. Domino stood in the corner near the barn entrance, eyeing her with caution. The Texas morning was heating up and a bead of sweat tickled the back of her neck. She slapped at a gnat that found the sweat enticing.

"Looking for that?"

Jackson aimed the Dum-Dum at what had once been a nice white, rather pricey Resistol, lying crumpled in the dirt not three yards from him. A gentleman would have picked it up for her, but not Jackson. He stood there with that 'possum-eatin' grin on his face and mischief in his eyes while she stormed across the paddock. Domino, that worthless piece of horseflesh, had taken his frustrations out on her new hat.

With the crumbled straw in hand, she turned her attention to the horse. Mad as he made her, Domino wasn't really worthless. Doc Everts was paying a nice price to have his new mount trained at the Circle W Ranch. Moving quietly, she went to the animal, took the dragging reins and led him out of the paddock and away from Jackson Kane, taking the memories of their past along with her.

"Hey, Shan!"

Shannon's shoulders slumped. The thud of boots against hard ground warned her of his approach. She should have known he wouldn't be that easy to get rid of. After ten years, he was bound to have a reason for showing up this way.

"Don't let the gate hit you in the backside on your way out," she called over one shoulder.

He caught up to her. "I take it you're still mad."

Incredulous, she stopped in the entrance of the shadowy barn. Standing right next to her this way, he looked gigantic. She'd forgotten how tall he was, how he dwarfed her completely. As a love-struck teenager she'd felt so protected by his size. As an adult she was unnerved.

"You are amazing, you know that?" She gave him her frostiest glare.

Eyes brightening, he pumped his eyebrows. "That's what they tell me."

"That was not a compliment." She swung around to face him, caught a whiff of grape sucker and a certain manly something that was Jackson Kane and no one else. "Why are you here, Jackson?"

Without a word, he took the reins from her and led the paint into a stall where he began the task of unsaddling. Dumbfounded, Shannon followed, taking refuge in the familiar scents of alfalfa hay and sweet-feed and leather tack.

"I asked you a fair question."

"All right then." He looked up from loosening the cinch and wallowed the sucker to one corner of his mouth. Shannon struggled not to follow the action, but lost that battle. His talented mouth had always fascinated her.

"Your granddad thought you could use some help out here. I was available so he hired me."

"You? Available? What happened to the rodeo circuit?" She refused to acknowledge the part about him being hired. Not to work for her, he wasn't. And she'd tell Granddad that herself.

"All my rowdy friends have settled down." He grimaced as if the admission pained him no end, then dragged the saddle off the prancing horse and tossed it over a saddletree. "So I've retired."

"Why don't you go back to Louisiana?"

"Nobody there I know anymore. Most of my kin are gone, except for Aunt Bonnie. And she's here in Rattlesnake."

Shannon knew Jackson's great-aunt Bonnie, a feisty twig of a lady, whose husband had died a couple of years ago. She worked at the grocery store in Rattlesnake, though she must be up in her seventies by now.

"I thought," Jackson went on, "my aunt could use a relative close by, and Jett and Colt figured work wouldn't be hard to find."

Opening the stall door, he led the horse forward and waited for the animal to head, bucking and kicking up dust, into the open corral. Sunshine gleamed on the black and white hide.

"Then go to work for them." Colt and Jett were the Garret brothers, two former rodeo cowboys who owned the largest ranch in the panhandle. Jackson and Jett had been traveling partners until an injury had forced Jett to retire from the circuit. "I don't need you or want you on the Circle W."

"Look, Shannon, can't we let bygones be bygones? We were kids back then. Kids," he added again with emphasis. "I didn't realize I'd hurt you."

She stiffened. "You didn't hurt me. You made me mad. No one had ever jilted me before."

"Who said I jilted you?"

"What other term do you use when a guy calls a girl and says, 'I'll catch you later, darlin',' and then never does?"

"Shannon." His voice fell to that honeyed baritone that had talked her into too many things. To her total amazement and eternal discomfort, he stroked one finger down her cheek. "Don't be mad."

How was it that she hadn't seen this man in nearly ten years and yet, he could stroll back into her life, and she felt as though he'd never left?

Yes, they'd been kids, foolish, imprudent teenagers who hadn't considered the consequences of their actions. He was a rodeo cowboy so she'd known he wouldn't stick around, and she'd promised herself not to be hurt once he was gone. And she wouldn't have been, except for what he'd left behind.

"All that happened a very long time ago, Jackson. I'm not mad. I'm not hurt. I've simply grown up and moved on."

"Then why the chilly reception?"

"Maybe I was surprised to see you after all this time."

He laughed, appreciating the ironic understatement. "Maybe."

"I'm too busy with the future to revisit the past, so if you don't mind..." She waved a hand around at the small ranch, the barns, the corrals, the modest brick house snuggled between two thick pines. "I have work to do."

"Show me the way."

"Excuse me?"

"Work is why I'm here, remember? Your granddad hired me?"

Shannon stewed over that little piece of information. Though she'd grown up here, her grandfather was the true owner of this place. But since his heart attack six months ago he'd let her call the shots. That he'd hired Jackson Kane irked her no end, but they'd been thinking of taking on

a hand and Granddad couldn't know that Jackson would be a problem for her. After all, their brief fling had happened a long time ago.

Yes, she needed more help now that Granddad was no longer able to carry his weight, but Jackson? She didn't think so.

"Then perhaps you should get your duties from him. I don't need you."

Jackson removed the lollipop from his mouth and studied the now empty stick. "He said you needed some help breaking these new colts and from the looks of that paint, I'd say he was right."

"I stayed on him way more than eight seconds. In a rodeo arena, I'd have won money. Would you have?"

"Guess we'll have to find out."

"Guess we won't," she said with a hint of mocking sarcasm. "Breaking the horses is my job. I'm the trainer. And that paint happens to be a special case, more difficult than most, but I promised his owner he'd end up as gentle as a dog. I'll keep that promise no matter how long it takes."

"There are new techniques available. Have you tried any of them?"

She shifted, uncomfortable under the growing heat and annoying buzz of buffalo gnats as well as his assumption that her training techniques were lacking.

"What are you? A horse whisperer or something?"

His mouth kicked up and brought with it that insolent dimple. "Maybe."

"Well, I happen to know what I'm doing. Granddad taught me to break horses from the time I could ride. His methods worked then and they work now. I don't need some rodeo cowboy turned horse psychologist to tell me how a horse thinks and why he behaves the way he does. Breaking that paint is a matter of wearing him down."

"Mind if I give him a try?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I do mind." So what if he'd spent most of his life riding broncs, both saddle and bareback. He wasn't a trainer. He was a rodeo performer. She could do this job better.

He shrugged. "Have it your way, but you're paying me a salary whether I do anything or not."

"Consider yourself unhired."

"Sorry." He didn't look one bit contrite. "Your granddaddy hired me. He's the only one who can fire me."

Shannon rolled her eyes heavenward. "I need to have a talk with my grandfather."

Jackson slouched against the paddock gate, unwrapped another Dum-Dum—a green one this time—and shot her his cockiest smile. "Go ahead. I'll wait here."

Jackson tipped his hat back and watched her go, admiring the cute little jiggle of her perfect backside encased in tight jeans. The worn spot between the pockets where she'd spent hours in the saddle was especially appealing. Not that he'd tell sweet Shannon that. She'd likely punch him in the nose.

She'd changed in ten years. And he sure wasn't complaining about that. At eighteen she'd been a girl, fresh as the outdoors and full of promise. The promise had been fulfilled. Today she was all woman, rounded in the right spots, and full of vinegar. He liked a little fire and sass in a woman. Shannon with her blue eyes and sun-blond hair barely reached his shirt pocket, but she could definitely hold her own. He looked forward to reminiscing in a more practical manner.

But first he'd have to get past that bad attitude she had toward him, a reaction that surprised him. He'd had no idea he'd left a burr under her saddle. Sure, they'd played around back then, had a good time, but it wasn't as if they'd been in love. Love? He almost shivered in spite of the warm day. They'd only spent a summer together, and at nineteen he hadn't known diddly about love. To tell the truth, he was nearly thirty and he still didn't know anything about the troublesome emotion. Didn't want to know either.

What he did know about was horses. And her grandfather had sense enough to know that if he was ever going to expand his training and breaking facility he needed a top-notch trainer. Shannon

may not like change, but her ideas were as antiquated as a crank telephone. He, on the other hand, had spent years studying under the best so-called horse whisperers, gleaning their techniques, adding some of his own. And he was good, though only a few knew it—so far.

During his rodeo years he'd helped other cowboys with rank mounts, but he'd had no real chance to prove himself in a larger capacity. That was all about to change.

From the moment he'd discovered Aunt Bonnie's financial troubles, he'd made up his mind to come back to Rattlesnake and help out. After all, she'd been there for him when he was four years old and his mother had jumped ship, leaving his bewildered father to raise a child alone. The kicker was Bonnie was his dad's aunt, not his, but she'd rearranged her entire life to raise him. She'd tossed over her job and had even waited to marry until Jackson was a teenager and old enough to look out for himself. He owed her big time.

He didn't have a lot of money, but regardless of what he had to do, nobody was foreclosing on his aunt's small home.

This job would help. And it would also propel him toward his dream. Though he'd shared the vision with no one else in case he fell on his face like a fool, Jackson had a dream that had kept him going for a long time. Someday, he'd run his own symposia on horse training and people would come from all over the country to have Jackson Kane teach them his methods. He'd take the rankest horses in the land and turn them into docile pets, well-disciplined ranch animals or fine rodeo stock.

In the meantime, he'd find a way to save Aunt Bonnie's home and make sure she was well taken care of in her old age. That was the least he could do.

The paint gelding Shannon had called Domino wandered back toward the arena, anxiously eyeing the cowboy but clearly hoping to make his way back inside the shady barn. Jackson gnawed at the sour-apple candy and held back a smile. Old Domino had a weakness. He wondered if Shannon had noticed.

Emitting a low whistle, he waited for the horse's reaction. As he suspected, the paint stopped dead still, flicked his ears forward and winded the strange cowboy.

Patience. That's what a trainer needed with a horse like Domino. So Jackson leaned against the iron gate, relaxed but watchful, waiting for the horse to come to him.

He didn't have to wait long. The gelding, tail swishing at flies, ears twitching, lowered his head and plodded toward him.

Jackson extended a hand to stroke the warm, smooth neck and inhaled the rich, animal scent. His chest strained toward contentment.

Yep. This was where he needed to be. Right here where horses were already boarded and ready to train, a ranch with a good, solid reputation. And regardless of Shannon's attitude or resistance, Jackson Kane was here to stay. At least for the time being.

Shannon knew better than to slam the door. Although she was a grown woman, Granddad would send her back outside and make her close the door like a lady. So even if she didn't feel much like a lady right now, she paused inside the office door and took three cleansing breaths.

Her grandfather looked up. "What's got you in a snit?"

So much for her efforts at self-control. "I'm not in a snit, but we do need to talk. Why didn't you tell me you'd hired Jackson Kane to work for us?"

Her grandfather laid aside his reading glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. Since his heart attack, he'd aged, and though he was seventy, Shannon had always considered him a rock until now. She'd been three when her parents had died in a car wreck and her widowed grandfather had taken her to raise. He was all the family she'd ever known and the thought of losing him scared her half to death.

Now she worried about him constantly. Nagged him to eat better, to rest more, and not to worry over her and the ranch. But she knew he did anyway.

"Now that I'm a useless old goat," he said, "you've got to have some help around here."

“But why Jackson?”

“Why not? He’s a cowboy, a mighty fine horseman, and seems like an honest enough feller.”

“How can you possibly know all that about a man who’s practically a stranger?”

“Colt Garret.”

“Oh.” Granddad would trust Colt Garret with his life. If Colt vouched for Jackson, her grandfather wouldn’t blink an eye about handing him the keys to the ranch.

She tried a new tack. “I’m the horse trainer. I don’t need him.”

“Now, Shannon, the man’s studied under John Lyons and you know dang well Lyons is the best there is. Horse breakin’ and trainin’ is a rough job, a man’s job. Why not let Jackson take over the horses so you can concentrate on running the business end of things. You’re a whale of a lot better at figures and purchasing than I am.”

“A man’s job!” Shannon hadn’t heard another word after that little jab. Of all the insults, she hated that one the most. A female doing a man’s job. All her life she’d battled ignorant horsemen who thought she should be more worried about breaking a nail than breaking a horse. Her pulse picked up. Anger lifted the hairs on her arms.

Granddad must have seen the fury in her. He raised a gnarled hand. “I won’t argue about this. Kane is hired and that’s that.”

All the blood in her body rushed to her head. “And I won’t allow it.”

“Now, Shannon—” Granddad stood up, reaching toward her, his tone cajoling. But he’d no more than found his feet when the outstretched hand grabbed for his chest.

“Granddad!” Argument forgotten in concern for the only parent she’d ever known, Shannon rushed forward to wrap her arms around him. “Is it your heart? Are you in pain?”

“Need to sit,” he managed, short of breath to the point of gasping. “My pills.”

Shannon took his arm and, frightened by the cold and clammy skin beneath her fingers, eased him onto the chair. Then she searched frantically through the desk for his medication, discovering the bottle at last beneath a stack of papers.

She shook out a pill, placed the tiny white tablet under his tongue and waited. From the looks of the bottle, this wasn’t the first episode of pain, but it was the first she’d witnessed.

“Should I call an ambulance? Or take you to the hospital?”

Eyes closed, he shook his head. “Get Kane.”

Kane? The request startled her. Why would he ask for Jackson? A sudden jolt of understanding exploded adrenaline into her bloodstream. Granddad thought he might be dying and didn’t want her to be alone.

Terrified to leave him for even a moment, Shannon had no choice. She raced to the back door and screamed out. “Jackson. Hurry. Granddad is sick!”

Waiting only long enough to see the tall Cajun jerk away from the gate and start in a long lope for the house, Shannon rushed back into the office and to her grandfather.

She sank to the floor beside his chair and laid her head against his knee as she’d done a thousand times growing up. Then the action had been to seek comfort from an anchor of a man who had all the answers. Now she needed to be the comforter, the strong one.

Please, God, don’t let me lose him. I’ll never argue with him again. Ever. If hiring Jackson makes him happy, I won’t say another word against him.

The squeak of the storm door and pound of boot steps heralded Jackson’s entry. If she hadn’t been so frightened, she might have been amused. For a big guy, he moved pretty fast.

He stormed into the room, expression concerned but confident. Shannon breathed an undeniable sigh of relief. She didn’t want to face this alone and somehow Jackson’s quiet strength gave her courage.

“What happened?”

“His heart. He had a heart attack about six months ago. He’s been on medication ever since.”

“Hospital,” Granddad managed to say through pale lips, though his eyes remained closed.

Jackson never hesitated. “Get the SUV,” he said to Shannon. “I’ll meet you at the back door.”

Then he scooped her grandfather into his arms as if he were a small child instead of a hundred-and-sixty-pound adult.

Grabbing the keys from the hook on the wall, Shannon raced for the truck.

By the time she pulled around back, Jackson was waiting. She bolted out of the driver’s seat and opened the back door, helping Jackson ease Granddad onto the empty bench seat. She started to close the door, but Jackson stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“You ride back here with him. I’ll drive.”

Unused to taking orders from anyone, Shannon wanted to argue, but the situation was too serious, and he was right. She needed to be with her grandfather. Any fool could drive. Even Jackson Kane.

Chapter Two

Jackson stood in the waiting room sucking in the unmistakable odor of antiseptic and sick people as he listened to a white-coated lady doctor explaining Gus Wyoming's heart condition to Shannon. He'd rather smell the back end of a horse any day than the inside of a hospital.

He shifted from one boot to the other and wished for a dip of snuff, though he'd broken that habit more than two years ago. He hated hospitals. Nearly everyone he ever knew who'd gone into one never came out alive—Jett Garret being the exception. And look what had happened to him. Jackson suppressed a shudder. His poor buddy had gone to the hospital and had ended up losing his dream. Never mind that he was deliriously happy with the cute little nurse he'd found there. Jackson couldn't imagine anything worse than giving up the dream—especially for a creature as undependable as a woman.

"Your grandfather has some blockage in his carotid arteries," he heard the doctor say and focused his full attention in that direction.

"Is that what causes his chest pain?"

"Yes. And the blockage also causes the shortness of breath when he overexerts himself." The doctor removed a pair of wire-rimmed glasses and cleaned them against her coat. "If Mr. Wyoming had seen a doctor when he first began experiencing symptoms..." She stopped and shook her head, apparently seeing the futility in what-might-have-beens. "He doesn't follow doctor's orders very well."

Shannon smiled, though Jackson could see the worry hanging on her like a wet saddle blanket—heavy and miserable. She'd been unfaltering since the moment they tore away from the ranch, her strength and constant upbeat chatter in the back seat of the SUV making the trip into town much calmer for him as well as the old man. There would be no hysterics from this little cowgirl.

Regardless of her sexy, all-woman looks, Shannon Wyoming was as tough as a pine knot. Always had been, but in the years since he'd seen her, she'd grown stronger. She had a set to her chin and steely determination in her blue eyes that said she wouldn't give up and she wouldn't give in. Much as he hated to admit it, he admired that. Almost as much as he admired her round little backside in a pair of tight jeans.

Her voice and his own common sense yanked him back into the conversation. Better not let Shannon catch him eyeing her behind.

"That's Granddad. He doesn't take orders well from anyone."

Like his granddaughter, Jackson thought. He shoved off the wall and moved up beside her. "Is he going to need surgery?"

The doctor looked from Shannon to the dark cowboy, her expression questioning.

"This is Jackson Kane," Shannon said. "Our...He works for my grandfather and me."

She'd finally admitted he had the job, but Jackson felt no victory in her saying so. If Gus couldn't carry on as always, she'd be stuck with her new hired hand whether she liked the idea or not. He'd have to deal with her reluctance if his own dreams were to come true.

"Not right now. And if he will do the things I tell him, maybe never. With the right medications we may be able to clear out the blockage or at least part of it. But he needs to make some significant lifestyle changes."

Jackson knew that wouldn't set well with a man like Gus, and from the way Shannon fidgeted she knew it, too.

"How can we help?" He didn't know why he felt compelled to see Shannon through this. Her family, her grandfather was not his business. But the anxiety around Shannon's mouth gave him the most irrational desire to kiss away her troubles and tell her everything would be all right. Must be a flashback to the good times they'd had when they were randy teenagers.

With a concerted effort, he drew his attention away from Shannon's mouth and back to the doctor.

The doctor replaced her glasses. "How does your grandfather handle his stress?"

"Handle it?" Shannon huffed. "He doesn't. He keeps everything bottled up inside so I won't worry about it."

Jackson could have told them that. Holding trouble inside was the cowboy way. Although lots of men blew off steam by getting drunk on Saturday night or picking a barroom fight, Gus wasn't the type. Maybe he had been in his younger days, but not now, not even ten years ago.

"I thought you might say that. While caused by the blockage, his blood-pressure problem is exacerbated by the stress," said the tiny doctor. "You need to do everything possible to eliminate any areas of tension in his life."

Shannon frowned, a cute little pucker between her eyes that gave Jackson the strangest desire to slip an arm around her waist and pull her close.

"That is not going to be easy." She gnawed on her full bottom lip and dangled if he didn't start staring at her mouth again.

"No, I don't expect it will be. But if Mr. Wyoming is to regain optimal health, he must reduce stress and control his blood pressure. If he behaves himself, he could very well beat this thing. Otherwise, he is looking at some serious complications in the not-too-distant future."

Shannon swallowed hard, her face blanching. "I can't let anything happen to my granddad."

"Nothing's going to happen to Gus," Jackson said. "We'll see to it."

At his reassurance, Shannon relaxed a little and got that determined jut to her chin. "Okay. You're right. We are going to get him well. I can handle the business side of the ranch, keep him from seeing any financial problems." She turned to Jackson. "Jackson, don't tell Granddad about any problems with the horses or their owners. Okay?"

Lying to a man he respected was not what Jackson had in mind. A man who spent his life working on a ranch, burning his muscles into exhaustion wouldn't take kindly to two women plotting his retirement to a rockin' chair by hiding things from him. And if Gus could hear this conversation, he would be one unhappy cowboy.

"Gus's nobody's fool."

"I'd be the first to agree with that. But I don't want to lose him either. For the sake of his health, we absolutely have to keep him relaxed. So gloss over any problems, only tell him the good things." She placed a hand on his arm and his pulse rate kicked like a young mule. "Please, Jackson. I need your help."

When she looked so worried like that, her blue eyes threatening a rainstorm, he was helpless to argue.

"I thought you wanted to fire me."

She crossed her arms, an action that pushed the front of her tank top up and out. A man could totally lose his concentration at such a sight.

"Don't rub it in."

A devilish impulse made him tease. "Admit you're glad I'm here, and I won't."

The good doctor, whom Jackson had completely forgotten, cleared her throat. "If you two will excuse me, I have rounds to make. We'll talk again before Mr. Wyoming is discharged."

She bustled away, pager beeping at her waist, nurses armed with charts following her down the long white corridor.

"Seems like a good doctor."

"She's terribly overworked, but yes, I trust her." Wearily she pushed her hair behind one ear. "If Dr. Torrence says Granddad will get well faster if he eats right and isn't stressed, then I have to find ways to keep him content."

"We."

“Pardon?”

“Didn’t you just admit you need my help?”

Her eyes lit up and two parentheses appeared around her full, kissable lips. “You win. I’ll take your offer of help.”

“Wait, I wasn’t finished.” He couldn’t resist the urge to goad.

She cocked an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Admit you’re glad I’m here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, Jackson. I’m glad you’re here. Are you happy now?”

“A little insincere, but it will do.”

Jackson had the sudden thought that he might be in trouble. He didn’t know why he cared, but he wanted her to want him here. And that worried him more than a little.

A few minutes later, Shannon headed to the coronary care unit to see her granddad. Jackson, bless him, made noises about phoning his aunt, but she recognized the effort to give her time alone with her grandfather. Now she wished he’d come along; she needed a referee.

“I wouldn’t mind dying so much if you was settled.” Propped up at a forty-five-degree angle, Granddad had tossed off the oxygen mask the minute she’d walked in. Though he sounded a bit winded, his will hadn’t weakened at all.

How was she supposed to keep him calm when he had such a one-track mind? “I am settled, Granddad. And you are not going to die.”

“Everybody dies, little girl. Even cranky old mavericks like me.” He shifted sideways in the bed, looking old and withered beneath the stark white sheets. “But don’t go changing the subject on me. I ain’t talkin’ about me. I’m talkin’ about you and this problem you have with finding a man and settling down.”

“I have everything in the world I want or need including a good man—you.”

He waved a hand in impatience, dismissing her statement as nonsense. “That ain’t what I mean and you know it. You need a husband, but ever time a prospect comes along, you lope off like a green-broke colt.”

“Men don’t interest me that much.”

“A few of ’em interested you enough to get engaged.” He screwed up his brow in thought. “How many fellers have you run off? I’ve lost count.”

He made her sound like one of those Hollywood types who ran through men faster than cold beer on a hot day. She took exception to that.

“Only three.” Three broken engagements, the last one less than six months ago. Each time, as soon as the commitment was made, she’d gotten cold feet. Instead of a ring on her finger, Shannon had felt as if they’d wanted to put a noose around her neck.

“Seems like more than that to me.” He coughed, a wheezy noise that worried Shannon.

She gave him a drink of water, waited for him to regain his breath before asking, “Are you all right?”

“Won’t be until I know you have someone to take care of you when I’m gone.”

Her voice rose in frustration. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Yes, I am. Margaret’s been waiting for thirty years and she never was a patient woman. I’ll hear about it for a month once I get over there so I need to quit procrastinating and get on with it. She’s just like you. Once she gets over her snit, we’ll be the happiest pair in paradise.”

Shannon knew he was trying to make her laugh, to make a joke out of dying, but she saw no humor in losing the man who’d loved her and provided for her ever since she could remember.

“Stop it, Granddad. Just stop it. I need you. The ranch needs you.”

“What you need is a good man to look after you, so when I do go I can rest in peace instead of wondering if you’re all right.”

So they were back to that again. All three of her engagements had been as much to please him as to please herself. But every single fiancé had wanted to run her life, as well as her ranch. As soon as the engagement had been announced, they'd expected her to become someone else, to give up her hard work on the ranch and become a lady of the manor. And she wasn't having any of that. She could ride, rope, train horses and run a ranch better than any man on the planet. She could stand on her own two feet, thank you. Shannon Gayle Wyoming did not need a man.

"Granddad, the doctor says you can live with this heart problem if you'll only learn to behave yourself better and stop stressing over the small stuff."

"Small stuff? My granddaughter's happiness is not small. I likely could get back on my pegs if I wasn't so all-fired worried about your future."

Guilt as heavy as a feed truck descended on Shannon. She'd always been Granddad's first and foremost concern, and she hated being the cause of his worry. To think that she was keeping him from getting well was just too much.

Sitting down on the pristine sheets, Shannon wrapped one hand around her grandfather's gnarled fingers. "Granddad, I promise you I will seriously consider finding the right man."

"When?"

She hedged. "Soon."

"What about this Kane fellow? I like him. He's a good horseman."

"Granddad!" Shannon shot a quick glance toward the door, thankful no one, especially not Jackson, was in sight. She could hardly believe Granddad had said such a thing. Why, Jackson had only just arrived and already Granddad was pushing the two of them together. "What are you thinking?"

"Well," Gus said, feigning innocence. "He ain't married. I asked him."

Shaking her head, she laughed. "Did you really?"

"Ah, only in the course of hiring him. I wasn't trying to fix you up or nothing."

She breathed an inward sigh of relief. "Thank goodness. I can do that for myself."

The last thing she needed was a matchmaking grandparent. Especially when it came to Jackson Kane.

Long ago she'd taken that painful summer, locked the memory in a closet inside her mind, and tried not to visit there too often. Occasionally, like today with Jackson so ever present, the memory sneaked out, but she'd learned to skirt around it, not look too close, and shove it back inside as quickly as possible. Remembering what-might-have-been hurt too much.

"Well, he ain't half-bad is he?" Granddad was rattling on. "I mean, he's decent looking. He knows horses. And he's clean."

"Clean?" Latching onto the silly notion, she giggled. If she were to make a list of characteristics for a potential husband, would this one have made the list? "Clean?"

Gus chuckled and pulled her into the hook of his arm.

At that moment, the door swooshed open, and Mr. Clean himself entered the room. Half-inclined on her grandfather's side, Shannon looked up and burst out laughing.

With a puzzled grin, Jackson glanced behind him then ambled into the room. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the now familiar Dum-Dum.

Granddad was right. He was definitely clean. The smell of his morning shower swirled in the door with him.

She couldn't help noticing the strong, dark, clean hands unwrapping the orange sucker or their graceful, effortless movements. She loved his hands, had always admired those hands that could hold a thrashing horse with an iron grip, but could also hold her with such tenderness.

The paper crumpled into his fist and that tiny sound startled her to awareness. Good golly, Miss Molly. What was she thinking? And why?

But she knew the answer to that. Granddad's silly nonsense had her noticing that Jackson Kane was much more than clean. He was cowboy sexy and more attractive than a man had a right to be.

Looking at him stirred some primal urge Shannon hadn't felt in a long time. Ten years to be exact.

Her heart thudded in her throat until she wondered if she was the one with the heart problem instead of Granddad.

With his talk of seeing her settled with a good man, and her desperate need to make him happy, Granddad had her thinking things she shouldn't.

Insanely ridiculous thoughts that she'd never allowed before danced through her mind.

Though the subject had never been broached, what if she had married Jackson back then? What if he'd known about the baby? Would he have asked her to marry him? Would she have agreed?

Pushing up from Granddad's hug, she turned her back to Jackson and began to straighten the bedside table. Her hands shook and she was acutely aware that her odd behavior created curiosity in the two men.

Shannon had been certain she'd settled this issue years ago, but Granddad's inadvertent teasing said the problem of Jackson Kane was a long way from being over.

Chapter Three

One month later, life on the Circle W had returned to some semblance of normality. To Shannon's relief, Gus, though straining at the bit, was trying hard to follow doctor's orders. Except for the thirty-minute prescribed walk he took each morning, he mostly pattered around in the house, grumbling about old age and bossy granddaughters.

True to his word, Jackson had gone above and beyond the amount of pay he received as assistant trainer. Long after he should have gone home to his aunt Bonnie's house in Rattlesnake, he worked on the ranch tending to things that he knew would bother Gus if left undone.

"You gonna stand there and stare at me or get acquainted with this new colt?"

At Jackson's amused voice, Shannon realized she had indeed been staring at him.

Morning looked good on him, she thought, noting that he'd come quickly when she'd called with the news that the mare was in labor. The moisture of his morning shower still glistened on his inky-black hair and the clean, fresh scent of soap and shaving cream amounted to sensory overload.

They were inside a stall in one of the horse barns to do the all-important job of imprinting a newborn foal. Jackson had arrived only moments before the mare delivered the new baby. They'd watched while the tiny bay had suckled and bonded with his mother, then lay down to sleep. That la-la land between sleep and wakefulness was the perfect time to handle a new colt.

The scene of mother and baby was as moving now as it had been the first time she'd experienced it. She always felt softer, more feminine somehow, after witnessing the miracle of birth. For some reason, having Jackson in the stall intensified the feelings.

Shannon went down on her knees beside the animal. "Hand me that brush on the wall behind you. I'll stroke his withers and sides while you handle his head."

Petting, rubbing and brushing, Shannon and Jackson worked to imprint the colt so that he would not be afraid of humans. Shannon was acutely aware of the movement of Jackson's muscular shoulders as he caressed the animal's ears and face. Longing, totally unwanted, shimmered through her.

More than once in their month of working side by side, awareness had simmered between them. This morning was no different.

"How you doing with Domino?" he asked, voice quiet in the dark, musty-scented barn.

"He's coming along," she hedged. What a lie. Domino was not cooperating. After more than a month, he could be ridden, but he had no manners and wasn't safe for most people to ride.

"Need any help?" Stroke, rub. Touch. Caress.

The shiver went over Shannon again. She had to stop looking at his hands. Still rotating the brush over the brown hide, she looked up at his face instead. Big mistake. Eyes like fudge sauce studied her. Little sparks of lightning shot off beneath her skin.

"No, I do not need help." To cover her other, less certain feelings, she chose to feign annoyance. "I've told you before. I know how to train a horse better than any horse whisperer. Domino has to learn who is boss and I can teach him that."

"I'd sure like to get my hands on him."

Pure stubborn pride made her say, "Forget it. You have plenty of other horses to train."

She probably could use some help from Jackson. He was good, excellent even. And she had grown to depend on him. She looked forward to his arrival each morning and enjoyed working with him all day. And if she felt an extra burst of energy in his presence or if she noticed how clean and masculine he smelled, well, so what. She was a woman. He was definitely a man. And her grandfather was putting irrational thoughts in her head on a daily basis.

Jackson, seeing the futility of arguing with her, changed the subject. "So how's Gus this morning?"

"He says he's all right."

Jackson looked up. "But you don't buy that."

"He had to take the nitro pills during the night. I heard him get up and went to check on him."

"Made him mad, too, didn't you?"

The man read her granddad well, and Granddad grew more lavish in his praise of the hired hand all the time. They'd traded war stories and Jackson often asked for Granddad's advice, making the invalid feel needed.

"Let's say he wasn't too pleased. He's been trying to hide the episodes from me, but I counted the pills."

"What do you suppose is causing them?"

"Me."

"You?" Jackson smoothed his hands over the horse's ears and down the side of the long, arched neck. "How so?"

She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Don't laugh now, but Granddad has this obsession. He thinks I need to get married, and until I do he won't stop fretting. He bugs me about "finding the right man" day and night, nagging that he's going to die and I'll be left all alone."

"Do you really think his condition is that bad?"

She shrugged, her hands stilling on the colt's warm back. "I hope not, but how can we really know for sure? As long as he stresses and frets over me, his blood pressure won't go down, and he'll keep having these episodes of chest pain."

"Scares you, doesn't it?"

They were inches apart, across the body of the small colt, one on each side, directly facing one another. Shannon saw the compassion in Jackson's eyes and found comfort in the kindness.

"If his health didn't scare me, I might see the humor in the whole idea of him trying to fob me off on some poor unsuspecting man. He actually thinks that's the best thing for me."

"Guess you'll have to get married then."

Shannon jerked her head up, saw he was joking and laughed. But the humor was fleeting.

"I feel so guilty knowing I'm the cause of his illness. If he should..." She couldn't bring herself to address the idea that her grandfather could actually die. "If something should happen to him I don't think I could stand it."

"Maybe you should date more. That might appease him for a while."

"Yeah," she said, voice tinged with sarcasm. "Like you see men lined up at the gate waiting to take me out."

"A woman like you can't have trouble getting a date."

"Jackson, I've dated, been engaged to and run off every decent man I know. Either they've given up, or I've lost my charm."

Did that sound as pathetic as she imagined? Sheesh. She hoped not. The one thing she didn't want was pity from Jackson.

"Sounds like you've been dating boys instead of men."

"What on earth is that supposed to mean?"

"It means if a man wants a woman bad enough, she can't run him off."

Ouch. That hurt. She'd run off all of her former loves, including Jackson.

"Which doesn't say much for my appeal then, does it, considering no one has stuck around to fight for me."

"Which proves they were a bunch of snot-nose boys, because there's definitely nothing wrong with your—" his gaze drifted up and over her "—appeal."

A skitter of excitement danced in the air between them. Shannon swallowed hard, and Jackson followed the movement, his eyes on her throat and then on her face. Heat, having nothing to do with embarrassment or the weather, flushed her skin.

She patted awkwardly at her chest. "My, it's getting hot in here."

Dumb, Shannon. Dumb.

His nostrils flared. "Sure is."

He let the colt's head ease gently to the ground. Then he stood and came around to where Shannon knelt, reached down a hand and pulled her up. Mischief in his eyes sent out a warning flare.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was raspy.

He backed her away from the horses, toward the stall door. "Demonstrating."

"But the colt," she protested, not sure she wanted to go wherever Jackson was leading.

"We'll work him again later." Jackson kept his gaze on her face, studying her as if the instructions for his puzzling behavior were written in secret code on her skin.

One minute she was backing toward the door and the next she was pressed against the hard wood with Jackson's powerful body holding her there. He slid a hand up over her throat, pressed two fingers into that spot above her collarbone where her pulse rattled like marbles in a tin can.

He was impossibly, wonderfully near, and every cell in her body remembered him. The heat and scent of him mixed with the barn scents of horse flesh and hay.

"Jacks—"

"Sshh." He laid a finger across her lips as his face came ever nearer. "Hush. Just hush."

Okay, so he was going to kiss her. And she thought she'd die of suspense waiting for him to get on with it. Instead, he stood there and stared at her, so close they were joined everywhere but the lips. She was vanilla ice cream to his hot fudge, ready to melt and mingle into a sweet, delicious pile.

He moved his fingers over her mouth, around her lips, down her throat to the edge of her tank top.

"Are you going to kiss me or not?" she demanded.

"Tsk. Tsk. So impatient." His warm, candy-scented breath whispered against her lips.

"Devil." She grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him.

A jolt of laughter rumbled from his chest into hers. He pulled back. "I'm doing the demonstrating here."

"Then get on with it."

He laughed again. Then that sexy Cajun mouth covered hers, and she went temporarily blind.

"What was that all about?" she asked when she could breathe again.

"They call it kissing."

She punched him in the chest. "Why?"

"Why do they call it kissing? I don't know. Guess we could look it up on the Internet."

"Ha-ha. Not funny. Why did you kiss me?"

His black eyes danced with orneriness. "You kissed me first, remember?"

Leave it to Jackson to bring that up. "But you started it."

He shrugged. "You were worried about losing your charms. I thought I'd check them out for you." As if totally unaffected by what had just occurred, he nonchalantly unlocked the stall door and pushed it open. A stream of sunlight filled the entry.

"And?" Was she totally pathetic or what? Begging the man to pay her a compliment.

His dimple deepened. "You want to go over to the club tonight? Free dance lessons on Tuesday."

She blinked at him, baffled. Jackson had always been like this though, so what had she expected? He could tease and please, but he never let his true feelings come to the surface. If she was looking for someone to soothe her ego, Jackson was the wrong man to ask.

When Jackson entered the ranch office that afternoon, he was still thinking about what had happened in the barn. He hadn't intended to kiss Shannon, but she'd seemed so uncharacteristically uncertain about her ability to interest a man that he'd been unable to resist. He felt sorry for her. Not that he didn't use any excuse at any time to kiss a good-looking woman, but he was here on business, not pleasure. And kissing Shannon again had certainly been all pleasure.

But he refused to regret the action. He liked her, always had, and looked forward to an evening of scooting a boot with her out at the club. They'd always had fun together, and she knew him well enough to know he wasn't interested in anything but fun and games.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Gus lay back in a brown leather recliner, sock feet sticking in the air. Only Gus Wyoming would insist on moving his recliner into the ranch office. But the room had his stamp all over it, from the mounted bass hanging over the huge fireplace to the old saddle piled in one corner.

Gus popped the chair lever and sat up. "Yep. Sure did. How's your aunt Bonnie getting along these days?"

"Ornery as ever." He didn't add that she was worried sick over her back mortgage payments, and he was going out of his mind trying to find a way to take care of the problem. If he'd lived a normal life, held a decent job he could borrow the money himself, but he had nothing to impress a banker.

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