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Soulmates

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Her Last Chance

DEANNA TALCOTT

Deanna Talcott

Her Last Chance

«HarperCollins»

Talcott D.

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Mallory Chevalle came to Wyoming seeking a mythical horse—and found a tough, honorable cowboy who stirred her sleeping senses to life. The virginal heiress had assumed it was her fate to be alone forever, until Chase Wells—with his special horse, Peggy Sue—two-stepped into her heart. Mallory was convinced that destiny had played a hand in leading her to this remote place—and into Chase's strong, soothing arms. But getting the stubborn rancher to believe their cosmic connection wouldn't be so easy. Legend had it, Peggy Sue could only be tamed by a chaste maiden—could the same be true about her owner?

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**“You are not ready to believe.
I see it in your eyes.”**

Chase sought Mallory’s gaze, intentionally holding hers. “Just tell me. Get it over with, so I can go to bed.”

She lowered her lashes demurely. There was something about her Chase couldn’t identify, but it tugged at him, making him want to tell her it was okay, that she could tell him anything. That at least he’d listen, even if he didn’t believe her.

“Your horse, Peggy Sue, is a special animal. Legend has it that her kind can only be tamed by a chaste and innocent maid.”

Chase stared at her. Something akin to a red-hot poker finished him off in the chest. He couldn’t breathe. “You’re a virgin,” he said flatly. “Untasted, untouched, untempted.”

She met his gaze again. “Oh, no, Chase. Not untempted.”

Dear Reader,

Grab a front-row seat on the roller-coaster ride of falling in love. This month, Silhouette Romance offers heart-spinning thrills, including the latest must-read from THE COLTONS saga, a new enchanting SOULMATES title and even a sexy Santa!

Become a fan—if you aren’t hooked already!—of THE COLTONS with the newest addition to the legendary family saga, Teresa Southwick’s *Sky Full of Promise* (#1624), about a stone-hearted doctor in search of a temporary fiancée. And single men don’t stay so for long in Jodi O’Donnell’s BRIDGEWATER BACHELORS series. The next rugged Texan loses his solo status in *His Best Friend’s Bride* (#1625).

Love is magical, and it’s especially true in our wonderful SOULMATES series, which brings couples together in extraordinary ways. In DeAnna Talcott’s *Her Last Chance* (#1628), virgin heiress Mallory Chevalle travels thousands of miles in search of a mythical horse—and finds her destiny in the arms of a stubborn, but irresistible rancher. And a case of amnesia reunites past lovers—but the heroine’s painful secret could destroy her second chance at happiness, in Valerie Parv’s *The Baron & the Bodyguard*, the latest exciting installment in THE CARRAMER LEGACY.

To get into the holiday spirit, enjoy Janet Tronstad’s *Stranded with Santa* (#1626), a fun-loving romp about a rodeo megastar who gets stormbound with a beautiful young widow. Then, discover how to melt a Scrooge’s heart in Moyra Tarling’s *Christmas Due Date* (#1629)

I hope you enjoy these stories, and please keep in touch!



Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

Her Last Chance

DeAnna Talcott



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Dedicated to the memory of Kay Landon, who prompted me to take this magical, mystical journey into the world of my imagination. She is the angel sitting on my shoulder.

Books by DeAnna Talcott

Silhouette Romance

The Cowboy and the Christmas Tree #1125

The Bachelor and the Bassinet #1189

To Wed Again? #1206

The Triplet's Wedding Wish #1370

Marrying for a Mom #1543

The Nanny & Her Scrooge #1568

Her Last Chance #1628

DEANNA TALCOTT

grew up in rural Nebraska, where her love of reading was fostered in a one-room school. It was there she first dreamed of writing the kinds of books that would touch people's hearts. Her dream became a reality when *The Bachelor and the Bassinet*, a Silhouette Romance novel, won the National Readers' Choice award for Best Traditional Romance. That same book also earned a slot as a Romantic Times nominee for Best Traditional Romance, and was named as one of Romantic Times' Top Picks. DeAnna's third Silhouette Romance novel, *To Wed Again?*, also won WISRWA's Readers' Choice award for Best Traditional Romance.

DeAnna claims a retired husband, three children, two dogs and a matching pair of alley cats make her life in mid-Michigan particularly interesting. When not writing, or talking about writing, she scrounges in flea markets to indulge #1 son's quest for vintage toys, relaxes at #2 son's Eastern Michigan football and baseball games, and insists, to her daughter, that two cats simply do not need to multiply!

Narwhal, Unicorn of the Sea

When the world was young, an extraordinary horse was banished to an island that came to be known as Narwhal. The gentle white beast, with the spiral-like ivory horn growing from its forehead, multiplied and lived in harmony and happiness. People soon learned that the horn, if given freely by such a horse, would spill forth with goodness and healing powers. The horse, greatly revered, was christened “the unicorn.”

Although the unicorn could only be tamed by a chaste and innocent maiden, one day a greedy landowner, discontent with his lot, captured a unicorn and forced it into servitude. A plague soon descended upon the island, and the unicorn grew sickly. A peasant, recognizing the broken spirit of the once-proud animal, chose, at great personal risk, to free it.

The unicorn fled to the hills, tossing its head in the sunshine, a rainbow at its back as it danced over bubbling spring water. In shame, the cruel landowner who had lost all of his possessions and all of his friends because of his selfishness, moved far, far away. When he was gone, peace and well-being returned, bringing the people a wealth beyond measure.

From that day forward, and for hundreds of years thereafter, a promise was made: any unicorn taken from the land, then returned to their origins, would dance with joy over the waters, blessing the people from the wellspring of life.

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Chapter One

“Dagnabbit!” Chase Wells winced and sagged heavily against the back wall of the barn. Then he simply surrendered to the pain and bent over double. He gave it a good minute before he straightened or even tried to flex his leg—when he did, he promptly clamped his jaws around a swear word.

In the back of his head, he could hear his mama scolding him.

Bite your tongue, Chase Benton Wells!

He gritted his teeth so hard, the enamel actually hurt.

Just as quickly, determination rose in him like a challenge. He wasn’t one to give up, never had been, never would be. He’d spent his whole life working this ranch and he’d taken his fair share of lumps. He’d fallen out of the bed of a pickup at seven, turned the tractor over when he was twelve, been gored by a bull at seventeen, and nearly drowned trying to spur his stallion across a swollen stream at twenty-three. One contrary four-year-old wasn’t going to give him grief.

He intended to tame that rambunctious little mare, or die trying. She was, by far, the most ornery animal he’d ever raised. Her mama, one of his prize Morgans, had taken a fancy to one of the wild mustangs that ran through the West and jumped the fence four years ago. When he’d recovered her months later, she was in foal with the little varmint who’d later come to be known as Peggy Sue. This mare, he observed ruefully, had apparently inherited her daddy’s bad temperament.

A small, lopsided grin unexpectedly dented his face, as he thought about their daily run-ins. Yesterday, Peggy Sue had left her calling card: a hoofprint on his belly, in nicely colored bruises. The day before that she bit him.

Using his shoulders, Chase pushed off the rough-sawn siding and tottered uncertainly on his one good leg. He yanked off his leather gloves and jammed them into his back pocket, before sinking his boot heel into the gritty dust of the barn floor and gingerly testing his weight. A groan immediately ripped through his lungs, and he shuttered his eyes against the unmerciful current of blue-black pain that exploded behind his eyelids.

He was getting too old for this, that’s what. Thirty-four years old and hobbling around like a broken-down cowboy.

Behind him, Peggy Sue kicked the boards of her box stall. Take that!

Chase didn’t even give her the satisfaction of looking over his shoulder; he just staggered out of the barn and into the blinding Wyoming sunshine.

He heard the hum of a car motor before he could actually focus on it. Squinting, he looked toward the house. Near the side porch of his sprawling log home, a snazzy little red convertible idled. Behind the wheel, with her blond hair floating over her shoulders, sat an angel.

He stared, smitten with disbelief.

Yup, that confirmed it. He’d died and gone to heaven. That little mare had kicked him into kingdom come.

He expected the angelic-looking woman to float out of the car, but she got out the traditional way, door and all. He started limping toward her, figuring he might as well go meet his fate. It was pretty obvious she didn’t have her wings with her. Instead, she was wearing the softest, curviest white top, and sexiest little pair of jeans and sandals. She waved at him, and the bracelet on her wrist tossed off glittering sparks.

He tipped his head, offering up his best Wyoming welcome, and wondering what the heck a woman like that was doing out in the remote country of Horseshoe Falls. Sucking in a deep breath, he made a conscious effort to shake off the pain and find out.

“Hi,” she called. “I hope I’ve got the right place. You must be Chase Wells.”

“I am.” He wiped his palm over his jeans, anticipating the introduction. He paused long enough to slide a lazy, assessing gaze over her. Right from the top of her wind-blown, tawny-streaked hair to the tips of her dainty feet and red-painted toenails.

His first impression was mind-blowing. The woman was as smooth as her flawless complexion, her moves as silky as her cultured accent. She was slender and willowy, and she carried herself with a confident air. With her chin tipped high, the mannerism wasn’t quite enough to give her straight nose a snobbish tilt, but rather an implied awareness of her surroundings. Her eyes were incredibly blue—like matched sapphires—and her brows arched over them like a pair of exquisite frames.

Then she smiled—and Chase’s pain ebbed and faded to a distant memory. His limp was reduced to a minor irritation. It struck him, oddly, how her mouth looked moist. Pink. Curving in just the right places, as if she knew how to make the most of a smile—and probably a kiss.

In one insane moment, he wondered if she kissed boobos—because he certainly had acquired a bunch of them.

“Hello,” she said, extending her hand. “I’ve had a terrible time. I took the wrong turn or something a few miles back.” The pressure of her grasp was negligible. She dragged her long, slim fingers across his palm, the tips of her ovaled nails sliding between his thumb and forefinger as seductively as a caress. “I’m Mallory Chevalle.”

Chase branded the name on his fuzzy brain and, quickly assessing her stunning attributes and the intriguing inflection of her voice, realized there was something vaguely familiar about her.

“You have a lovely home,” she continued, letting her gaze drift past his shoulders to the vista of mountains to the west, then to the lush valley behind the barns, the corrals and the house. “It’s more like a resort than a ranch.”

“We’re comfortable.” Chase squinted, wondering why any woman who wore diamond studs rather than turquoise in her ears was looking for the Bar C.

She laughed, an engaging little sound that seemed to bubble right up from the depths of her soul. “I honestly don’t know how you get any work done. I’d be saddling up every day for a ride.”

“Working ranches don’t offer up a lot of time for pleasure riding.”

“That’s a shame, especially when you raise such fine Morgans.”

“You know about our stock?”

“Of course. I was pretty impressed with how some of your mares placed at the stock show in California.”

Chase nodded, putting two and two together. His partner, Bob Llewelyn, made the rounds this time of year, training and showing in all the big Morgan shows. Bob was an affable guy, he made friends with everyone. “And you came all the way out here to check us out?”

“No...” She apologetically lifted a shoulder. “Your partner sent me.”

Chase couldn’t beat back his surprise.

“I told him I was looking for stock for my family’s stables, and he promised I’d find just what I wanted. Um...he mentioned, too, that you’ve even got some stock that’s part mustang. That you’ve worked with some of the free-roaming mustangs that have been captured and relocated.”

Chase frowned and glanced back at the barn, annoyed that he hadn’t taken time to close the door. It wouldn’t do for her to come across that lame-brained Peggy Sue. “Yeah. I have. But what’re you interested in for your stables? Specifically.”

She looked like she was about to say something, then stopped. “Why don’t you show me what you’ve got?”

Something about her answer sounded a little hollow and didn’t ring true. Experience told him buyers always knew what they wanted. They either needed broodmares or a good show horse. They wanted a stud to improve their stock or a pleasure horse for their kids. He glanced at her suspiciously, not quite believing she drove hundreds of miles just to browse through the merchandise.

She paused, the hint of a frown clouding her features, darkening her eyes. “You were expecting me, weren’t you?”

Chase inclined his head, vaguely wondering if he should have checked the answering machine again. At that precise moment something near his heart started vibrating. If he hadn’t known better, he’d have thought this Mallory woman had created the stir.

He pulled the snap on his chest pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “Excuse me,” he apologized, taking a step back and slightly turning his back.

“Chase?” his partner, Bob Llewelyn, inquired.

“Yeah?”

“Sorry, buddy. I forgot to tell you Mallory Chevalle is headed your way. Put her up for a few days, will you? Show her around, give her a good time. Her daddy’s that shipping magnate, Hewitt Chevalle?” The realization hit Chase like a ton of bricks. From his peripheral vision, Chase narrowed a gaze at the woman who had politely turned away from eavesdropping on his call. “Mallory’s interested in buying some stock for the family’s estate in Narwhal.”

“Well...thanks for the warning.”

“No problem.”

“She’s here now.”

“Oh.” The word was small, precise and cautious. “The house isn’t a mess, is it?”

“What do you think?” Chase snapped. “It’s a ranch house, not a guest house.”

Bob coughed, letting a second of strained silence slip away. “Didn’t mean to inconvenience you,” he said finally, “but I figured we could use at least one client who wouldn’t quibble over the price.”

Chase snorted. “I’ve got forty Morgans that need my attention. I haven’t got time to serve up a little luxury, like brunch at eleven and tennis at four. Sorry.”

“Well, you know,” Bob went on, “the thing about Mallory is, she likes cowboy boots and leather jackets just fine. Put her to work. She won’t be in the way.”

“Put her to work,” he repeated. “Is that before or after the beluga caviar, Brie cheese and vintage wine?”

Bob guffawed. “Chase, you got it wrong. This is one woman that doesn’t need to be waited on. She won’t be any trouble at all.”

“Right.”

“Hey, I’m telling you. Money’s no object, not to the Chevalles of Narwhal. They’re loaded, but you’d never know it. And Mallory might be an heiress, and a hands-off woman, but she’s a real fine gal to spend some time with.”

“I’ll file that away for future reference,” Chase said unpleasantly.

“Do that. Keep her happy, Chase. It’ll be in the best interests of the Bar C.”

Knowing he had no other choice but to give in, Chase ended the call. Although Mallory had discreetly turned her back, Chase regretfully wondered how much of the conversation she’d heard.

She swiveled, her sandaled foot pivoting on the gravel. With her head down, she glanced up at him demurely, the corners of her almond-shaped eyes lifting slightly in amusement. “He didn’t tell you, did he?”

“My partner has a little trouble with some organizational skills. Like being on time, forwarding messages or paying the taxes when they’re due. It plumb slipped his mind to warn me that you were coming to look at stock, Miss...um...Chevalle.”

“Mallory. Just call me Mallory.”

He nodded tightly. “Narwhal,” he said thoughtfully. “Is that somewhere up near Monaco, or that neck of the woods?”

“Close. At least it’s on that side of the ocean,” Mallory said, fighting the urge to grin at Chase Wells’s discomfort. American men were so peculiar when it came to Europeans and Old World

money. They simply did not know how to handle it, how to behave or what to say. So, instead, they always swaggered a little and slipped into a “don’t mean nuthin’ to me” demeanor. A perverse thought went winging through her head, and Mallory gave in to it. “Did I hear you say something about tennis? We really should play a set. I’d love to see you in your whites on the court later this afternoon.”

Chase stared at her. Not one muscle in his handsome face twitched—and he did have a handsome face. A shock of Cherokee-black hair swept back from his wide forehead and feathered away from his temples. It was cropped in neat arcs over his ears, with a scruffy little fringe riding his shirt collar. He had a thick jaw, blunt chin and a mouth that just managed to wander a little higher on the right side. Beneath a slash of dark lashes, his eyes were gunmetal gray.

“Tennis? I thought you came out here to look at horses.”

Mallory swallowed a giggle and carefully arranged her face for the rugged cowboy, feigning innocence. “Oh, I did. But tennis is such a great stress reliever, don’t you think?”

He sucked in a deep breath, pumping his brawny chest up another intoxicating notch. Mallory could barely tear her gaze away. Considering her words, he hung his thumb over his pewter belt buckle while the toe of his boot swiped at a rock on the drive. “The thing is, ma’am, this here’s Wyoming. We don’t play them silly little games out here. And the only thing I got that’s white is my underwear.”

Mallory laughed, even as a touch of pink stained her cheeks. “Then we should get along just fine. Because I haven’t had a racket in my hand for five years, and I never do brunch. The day’s half gone by then, and I like to get up early.”

Chase hesitated, then his mouth curled and the corners of his eyes slightly crinkled.

Mallory innocently lifted her shoulder. “Bob said you could put me up for a week or so. Until we settle on the horses.”

Chase didn’t reply. He just looked at her, his eyelids narrowed, his brow furrowed.

“I can sleep anywhere. Really.”

“Mmm.” He didn’t sound convinced, he just kept looking at her, in that disturbing cowboy way, as if something else was going on in his head.

“If you’ve got an extra pillow and a blanket, I can sleep on your sofa.”

He barely inclined his head.

“I promise not to be any trouble.”

“Persistent little thing, aren’t you?” he said finally. “Ma’am, you don’t understand. This isn’t a bed-and-breakfast. It isn’t a resort.” He rocked back on his heel, and for a flickering instant Mallory was certain she saw him grimace. “It’s a business. I sell horses, I don’t offer a weekend getaway at a dude ranch.”

“Perfect. Because I don’t want one,” she said. “I want the perfect horse. I want something special and unique. For my father. And, from what Bob tells me, you have it. I’ll pay well for what I want, and I guarantee I’ll make this worth your while.” Mallory didn’t intend to sound haughty or pretentious. But she wanted the mare Bob told her about—and she felt driven to bring it home to Narwhal, where it belonged. Her father’s health was failing quickly and time was of the essence. “A week,” she bargained. “One week out of your life for a business deal...that’s not so difficult, is it? If I don’t see what I’m looking for I’ll be on my way. On the other hand...”

“Yes?”

“Narwhal has a wonderful summer camp for children. One of my favorite charities is to donate horses for their riding program. Maybe you’ll have something they could use. If I don’t find one thing, maybe I’ll find the other.”

Chase, his features tightening, looked away and made that fascinating whistling sound cowboys make, by crimping his lips and blowing air between his teeth.

“I don’t want to intrude. I could sleep in the bunkhouse,” she offered. Then she glanced over the assortment of barns and outbuildings. “You do have a bunkhouse, don’t you? They always have them in the movies.”

He turned back, arching a disbelieving brow at her. “Yes, and I can see it now. You, and Lewt, and the rest of the boys, hanging out and playing poker and drinking beer till midnight.” He drew a hand over his face, scowling down at her. “Listen, Mallory, I think it’s nice that you want a good-looking little pony to take home as a souvenir. For your daddy, or your projects or whatever. But I do more than sell horses. I look for a good fit. With my animals, I make a solid match with the buyer. I’ve got a reputation to protect—and that means I don’t sell to just anybody.”

Mallory stiffened, drawing back. Her pride suffered, but self-control was necessary. She had to see that animal, she had to bring it home to her father. “I understand,” she replied coolly. “But I’m not just anybody. I’m Mallory Leatrice Chevalle of Narwhal, accomplished equestrienne.” She paused for emphasis. “That’s horsewoman, to you. In Wyoming language.” The muscle along Chase’s jaw thumped, giving Mallory indescribable satisfaction. “I’m equal to any mount you offer me. And I know my horses.”

A flicker of interest sparked in his steely gaze. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Okay. Then you can have the guest room,” Chase grudgingly allowed. “Breakfast is on the table at 6:00 a.m. The rest of the day is catch-as-catch-can. And it’s nothing fancy. We do plain food and plain hard work. We’ll start this afternoon, because I’ve got some spirited mounts I’d like to show you. In fact, we’re working with one right now that you might want to take a look at.”

Chapter Two

Chase watched Mallory lean over and reach in the back seat of her flashy convertible. The subtle shift of her hips, the gentle swing of her breasts enticed him.

Bristling at his own human reaction, Chase strode over to the flatbed truck and yanked his hat off the bed, then jammed it on his head. Mallory effortlessly hauled out two small suitcases.

A smidgen of guilt niggled into his subconscious. He didn't mean to treat her poorly, but he had more to do than nursemaid an heiress on holiday. Particularly in the vague hopes she'd find some little trinket—in the nature of horse-flesh—to carry back to Narwhal.

Maybe it had been memories of his daughter, Skylar, that provoked him into agreeing to this nonsense. Since she'd been gone, he'd thought a lot about what was important, what wasn't. If this summer camp for kids was legitimate, he didn't want any regrets.

Huh. When he got up this morning, he sure never figured he'd be discussing sleeping arrangements with some European highbrow. Imagining her sacked out on his couch was a stretch. It offered up a disturbing vision that taunted...like the innocuous vulnerability of Snow White, prone, before a bevy of rough-edged, hard-talking, tobacco-spitting cowboys. It just didn't equate.

"Here. Let me help you with those," he said gruffly, coming to her side.

She half turned, a protest on her smiling lips, when he reached over and snagged the suitcases from her.

A tingle of awareness immediately buzzed through his nerve endings and over his hand. Chase grimaced, and grasped the leather handles a little tighter, dismissing the sensation. Residual effect from last week, when that blasted Peggy Sue caught his hand against the manger, he told himself.

"Thank you," Mallory said politely, stepping aside, then following him up the wide grass walkway.

Silently, he forged straight ahead. The heels of his boots made a hollow sound on each of the four steps. He jerked open the front door and, with an elbow, propped it open.

Appearing not to notice his bad humor, Mallory stopped inside the great room, her sandals pivoting on the wide knotty-pine floorboards. "Oh, my..." She glanced up at the exposed redwood beams, then down to the fieldstone fireplace. "This is so cozy."

Chase sent her a scathing look. "Yeah, just like your typical little hunting lodge, I suppose."

The comment was apparently not lost on his guest.

"Narwhalians see no value in hunting for pleasure," she replied evenly. "We are known the world over for exquisite animals, for fine horses and stables. But legend has it that our small island became invincible when a peasant, at great risk, freed a starving unicorn from its cruel master, giving the animal back his wild heart. Because of his kindness, the peasant came to know years of comfort and good health. His children, chaste and pure of heart, befriended the unicorn and came to know prosperity. For generations, people have honored his gesture. I honor it, too."

Chase stared at her, wondering if she was putting him on. She didn't retract a word. Not one. She simply met his gaze.

"Legends...I see," he said uncomfortably, but not seeing at all. "Ah...well, beggin' your pardon, ma'am. My misunderstandin' about Narwhal and all."

Determined to change the subject, Chase moved ahead of her and into the room. He kicked down a corner of the black-and-russet Navajo rug. The room was scattered with them. Leather furnishings, a sofa and several chairs, were arranged in front of the fireplace.

Mallory trailed a hand over the rustic willow and reed high back chairs and matching table. "Your local artisans do incredible work," she murmured.

Chase brushed off the comment. "I got it from the local discount store. If you look, you'll probably find a gold foil Made in China sticker."

Mallory lifted her eyes, her gaze narrowing. “You do have a lovely home, Chase, no matter how you put it together.”

Her grace and tact made him feel like a heel. It wasn’t hard to explain why he felt so prickly around her, but he had to put a stop to the defensive reactions and the sharp dismissals. Since Sharon—and particularly Skylar—he’d been edgy, and short with people who didn’t deserve it. “Thanks,” he said finally. “The old ranch house, the one I grew up in, burned to the ground about ten years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That must have been dreadful.”

He lifted a shoulder. “We’re strong. A little like the phoenix rising from the ashes.”

Mallory brightened, her features animated, her eyes dancing with recognition. “I know that story,” she said, “and I love it.”

In spite of himself, he grinned, setting the suitcases down. “You know a lot of them. Legends about Narwhal, the Phoenix...”

“I’ve always been fascinated with legends and lore. I’ve found there’s a bit of truth in many of them. Particularly for those who believe.”

The sincerity of her gaze intrigued him. “And you believe?”

The corners of her lips lifted. “My country is steeped in legends. Stories are handed down from generation to generation, and it has been that way for hundreds of years. I believe the storytellers were the wisest, and they have knowledge to share, if we choose to listen.”

Chase stared at her, fully aware she had not answered his question. “Well...as for our little phoenix...we were able to rebuild the house the way we wanted.” He gestured to the huge picture windows and the vista of foothills beyond. “Before, that view was hidden by a coat closet, a washroom and a two-car garage.”

She smiled, inclining her head. “Ah, that was also the way of our forefathers. Function, not beauty.”

Beauty. With Mallory the word took on new meaning. Chase shifted, trying not to stare into the baby-blue depths of her eyes, trying not to acknowledge the sexy, come-hither waves of her hair.

“The Chevalles have a home on the ocean like that,” she continued. “At night, the fog rolls in, and it’s cold and drafty and miserable. I hate staying there. I like warm, cozy things around me.”

The craziest feeling shot through Chase’s arms, as if they were incredibly empty. He imagined wrapping his arms around the woman standing next to him, giving her that warm, cozy feeling. Sharing it. In that same instant, it occurred to him that they’d be good together. Very, very good together. He hastily reached down and snatched up the suitcases, before any more goofy thoughts made Swiss cheese of his sanity. He hadn’t been with a woman for more than two years, and the end of that relationship had been filled with misgivings and regret. He wasn’t going that way ever again. “The guest room is nothing fancy,” he said, leading the way to the stairs, “but—”

“Don’t.” She laid a hand on his arm, stopping him. “You keep saying that. ‘It’s nothing fancy.’ I didn’t come out here to be entertained, or to be impressed by you or your home. I came because I knew there was something special to be found. I’m not intending to stay, Chase. More than anything, I want to get home, to my father.”

The room Chase offered her was charming and rustic. Mallory carefully eased her suitcase onto the brilliant hues of a ruby-and-rust quilt. It covered the four-poster bed, the bed frame made of weathered lodgepole pine. She turned to place her cosmetic bag beside the oil lamp on the old-fashioned highboy, then paused to straighten the crocheted doily beneath it.

Chase still stood in the doorway. “If there’s anything else you need...” he trailed off. “Towels, soap...”

She shook her head and turned back to the suitcase.

“Extra blankets are in the hall closet.”

“Thank you.” She snapped the latch on her suitcase and threw open the lid. Her nightgown was on top, and she pulled it out, tossing the silk negligee onto the pillow. The spaghetti straps clung to the quilted shams, but the ivory silk slithered down the side of the bed, as if she’d issued an invitation.

Mallory was so anxious to dig out her boots that she never gave it a second thought—until she saw Chase staring at it. The gown was out of place and she knew it.

“I should have brought flannel, yes?”

He blinked, as if disturbed from his reverie.

“It’s cold out here at night, I suppose,” she said.

“Cold?” He looked confused. “No, not necessarily. Not in June.”

“Well, the way you were looking...at my nightwear...” she continued, lifting an innocent shoulder.

Chase cleared his throat and pulled himself off the door frame. “This is cowboy country, Mallory. We don’t see many of them things hanging on the line out here.”

Pursing her lips, she frowned. “The line? I don’t understand.”

“The clothesline. Outside, drying on the clothesline,” he explained. “We do wash and wear. Denim or dress shirts, it doesn’t matter. It all goes in the laundry and out on the line.”

“I see. Then I shall remember not to make that mistake,” she said lightly, smiling at him. “Perhaps I could hang my things in your shower instead? I wouldn’t want to offend anyone.”

“Yeah. Okay, I guess.” Inside, Chase winced. “How about if I go fix us a bite to eat, and then we start looking at stock? You want to go home, and I don’t want to keep you any longer than necessary.” He glanced back at her open suitcase, where scraps of silk and satin seemed to bubble out over the top. “I keep you too long, and you may go cluttering up my bath with all those skimpy little...” Feeling like a fool, he let the sentence drift, fully aware he was too embarrassed to say the word *panties* in front of some highfalutin socialite.

Mallory pulled out a stack of knit tops, balancing them on the palm of her hand. “Don’t worry. I always travel light. I can’t possibly smother you in lingerie.”

Chase swallowed. Hard. His lips clamped together, and he tipped his head, backing from the door.

Mallory watched him leave, and the oddest awareness coursed through her, curling down into her middle and beyond.

It was disturbing to know that the man’s bedroom would be only two doors down, and that they’d share the same bath. While she didn’t expect the degree of privacy she had grown up with in Narwhal, the intimacy, the nearness of the ranch house disturbed her.

No. Chase Wells disturbed her. He had from the moment her gaze fell on him.

There was no logical explanation for her feelings. None. She’d dealt with men every day of her life, but she’d never let herself get too close to any of them. Her father had raised her after her mother had died of pneumonia at an early age, and she’d grown up around the men he’d surrounded himself with. Her background in history and international law often put her in challenging situations with businessmen who contracted with her father’s shipping company. Yet none of them fascinated—or provoked feelings in her—like this brief encounter with Chase Wells had.

Chase Wells was the proverbial man’s man, with shoulders as wide as wood and a stance that was daring, and devil-may-care. He had the most reckless, engaging smile, and dark, brooding eyes. His gray gaze could be as seductive as smoke or as striking as silver.

It was foolish, she knew, to even consider such things. She needed to guard her innocence, particularly until this issue with her father was settled. With his health deteriorating, he often reminded her that he expected her to run his vast shipping empire. Until then he wanted her, his only daughter, to experience freedom. Yet every day she was gone from him, she missed him terribly.

Her father, Hewitt Chevalle, was an honorable man. He chided her to be capable, not spoiled, intelligent, not dull, a peacemaker of the world, not an adversary to it. When she was strong-willed, he took full credit; when she was insufferable, he took her to task.

Yes, Chase Wells would sell her the horse she wanted for her father and then send her on her way. Her family's estate, situated on the meadow where the legend claimed the unicorn once frolicked in Narwhal, was a hallowed place, with a maze of freshwater springs and flower-laden glens. Mallory was convinced that if she could bring one of the gifted animals back to its origins, her father, as caretaker, would experience relief from his debilitating disease—and she would be freed from the responsibility of running the gargantuan shipping fleet. If her father experienced respite for even a short period of time, it would be a blessing.

Chase Wells, without even knowing it, could have the solution to her problem. He may have affected her, in some strange and obtuse way that she didn't understand, but she would rise above it. She had to rise above it.

She would smile at him, gently, and win him over. It was very easy, really. All she had to do was put her mind to it. She had no other choice—because time, and her father's health—were slipping away.

Chase fed her tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, and it was delicious, all of it.

"I suppose Bob told you none of the stock he's showing is for sale," he warned, rising from the table to clear away their emptied soup bowls. "Julep's TeaRose is garnering so much attention right now, we'd be crazy to sell her. As for the other two—Ruger's Opal and Ruger's Delight—they both have offers pending."

Mallory picked up their paper napkins and wadded them together, inordinately conscious of the way Chase moved. "I'm not necessarily interested in show stock," she said carefully. "What garners interest in the world of show does not interest me."

He wagged a brow at her, as if he didn't believe a word she said.

"I'm more interested in stock for personal reasons," she explained. "As I said, I'd like to get my father something special. The idea of bringing him home an animal with mustang blood fascinates me."

A dagger of emotion thrust at Chase's heart, then twisted painfully. Skylar had loved Peggy Sue's wild beauty, she had related to the mare with childlike trust. "I suppose your father has dozens of Thoroughbreds."

Her laugh was tinged with embarrassment. "His stock is dwindling," she confided. "I keep confiscating them for the children's summer camps. But he never refuses me."

"So you're spoiled."

"Of course. Aren't only children supposed to be?" Reminders of Skylar—the way she wheedled to get what she wanted, the lilt of her voice, the tilt of her eyes—torpedoed through his mind. "I don't know," he said stiffly, "I've got a working ranch here—I don't dawdle around, indulging kids."

She sighed. "You should. It's a delightful pastime. And I don't regret it. Not one bit. Of course, I'll admit my father's estate lends itself to my purposes," she said. "It's c'alle dunois denoire et Legina de Latoix."

"Excuse me?"

"In your language it would translate to Valley of the Lost Legends. There are thousands of acres. Meadows as far as the eye can see, pools of fresh springwaters. And it's protected by mountains on all sides."

"Sounds like Wyoming, ma'am."

"Not quite. To the west, beyond the tallest of those mountains, is the Atlantic Ocean."

"You got me there." Chase felt himself smile as he imagined putting one of his Morgans out to pasture, in a place that Mallory Chevalle described as if it were this side of heaven. "I imagine we'll find you something to take back to your valley. My hands are out mending fence, but Lewt's

saddling up a couple of three-year-olds for you to look at. We can head down to the corral any time you're ready."

"I'm ready now," she said, standing. He reached for the dirty napkins she still had wadded in her hand, but she moved them out of his grasp, avoiding contact with him. "I'm perfectly capable of putting trash in the receptacle. Thank you for lunch," she added, picking up his water glass and hers.

"Bob said I could put you to work," Chase commented, "but I don't think he meant it. In the same sentence, he warned me to treat you well."

Mallory grinned. "He did? He's such a nice guy. I took a liking to him right away."

Envy inexplicably welled in Chase. "Yeah. Bob's a guy you can count on."

"If I could choose a big brother, I would choose him," she declared. "That's how I think of him. Like a big, wonderful friend."

Big brother? Wonderful friend? Apparently there had been nothing between them, and Bob was a lady's man, for sure.

Relief rumbled through his chest. He didn't know why. It shouldn't even matter, not after Sharon. "Come on," he said, giving the table a hit-or-miss job with the dishcloth, "let me show you some good Morgan stock."

Mallory smiled eagerly over at him. "I can't wait."

It was a killer smile, and it crimped something in the region of Chase's heart.

They left the dishes in the sink, and headed out for the corral. Lewt, the oldest, the goofiest, of his hired hands, had saddled a bay filly he'd dubbed Jellybean. Well into his seventies, Lewt spent his time puttering around the horses. Another mount, a chestnut gelding named Lucifer, was tethered to the hitching post.

"Lewt, meet our guest..." Chase stalled, reluctant to introduce her as Mallory Chevalle, heiress of Chevalle Shipping. "She's interested in some good bloodlines."

"Ma'am." Lewt tipped his hat.

Mallory shook his gnarled, arthritic hand. "Hello. You must be happy, Lewt, to spend your days out here, with horses like these."

Lewt's eyes crinkled. "I am, ma'am. And I got me a nice piece of horseflesh here, if you will." He affectionately slapped Jellybean's neck.

"Ruger's Rose of Sharon," Chase explained, "otherwise known as Jellybean."

"Jellybean?"

Lewt reached over to move her forelock aside. Mallory leaned closer, her gaze riveted on Jellybean's forehead. Instead of a star, the mare had three small spots, all connected, and reminiscent of jelly beans.

"She's beautiful," Mallory said, her shoulders sagging as she allowed the horse to nuzzle her hand.

From the corner of his eye, Chase watched Mallory carefully.

Mallory had inherited the hands of an aristocrat, he allowed. Either that or the Chevalle wealth had shaped them. Her knuckles were slim, the bones of her wrist, delicate. Long, tapered fingers moved in harmony, making each move effortless, engaging.

As Lewt moved aside, Chase watched in fascination while she ran her hands over Jellybean's head, her neck and down her withers, all the while crooning to her. Soft, lulling endearments that came from the back of her throat, her chest.

The woman was amazing. Maybe she really did know something about horses.

Mallory confidently leaned from the waist and slid her hand down Jellybean's leg, pausing at her fetlock, then lifting her hoof to examine it.

Jellybean obliged, but Chase was more intent on the way Mallory's tiny white top pulled from the back of her jeans. It fit her like a second skin, curving at the arch of her lower back, dipping into the depression that accommodated her spine. As she bent, the sleeves pulled against her arms,

straining the seams in fine lines across her shoulders. Stretched thin, the knit revealed the two thin straps of her bra and the hook closure in the middle of her back. The suggestion of her intimate apparel made Chase shift uncomfortably. In his mind's eye, he saw that silky thing draped across the bed. He thought about her offhand comment, about smothering him in lingerie.

Damn, it'd be a helluva way to go.

Mallory dropped the horse's hoof, and in the back of Chase's mind, it sounded like a punctuation mark exploding in the soft dirt.

"Hard, firm, well muscled," Mallory breathlessly approved.

Chase blanched, quickly rearranging his features before Mallory lifted her innocent face to his. "All that, and more," he muttered under his breath. "Here. Let me take her out for you," he said, reaching for the reins. "See what you think."

The fact was he needed to keep his hands, his thoughts, busy. The woman riled him in ways he couldn't fathom. Sliding the toe of his boot into the stirrup, Chase threw his leg over the saddle, grateful for the ease of movement, the stretch of his jeans. Jellybean nervously sidestepped; Lewt and Mallory both backed away.

He nudged the filly into a wide canter around the arena, taking the edge off her high-strung temperament. He put her through her paces, figure eights, reining her in from a trot to a walk.

Mallory and Lewt had moved outside the corral, and their arms hung over the top rail. Periodically, Chase saw Mallory incline her head nearer Lewt's in conversation. He wondered, vaguely, what she said.

He pulled up before them, and arched a brow at her.

"She throws her head a little at every command, doesn't she?" Mallory replied to his unasked question.

Chase stared at her, definitely deflated.

"Yup," Lewt agreed mildly, propping the sole of his boot on the bottom rail as he spat into the dirt, "reckon she does. Never really noticed it until Mallory here pointed it out."

Chase felt like the value of his stock had plummeted. Jellybean was the perfect horse for Mallory. He smiled through gritted teeth. "Let's take a look at Lucifer," he suggested.

But Lucifer, Mallory decided, had a slight inclination to wring his tail. Barely noticeable, of course. But it was apparent to her discerning eyes. To Chase's consternation, Lewt agreed.

While Lewt led both animals back to the barns, Chase brought out Topaz. The filly worked beautifully, her agility to turn corners and stop on a dime her finest feature. When Mallory asked to ride her, Chase puffed up a little, figuring he'd made a match. An hour later he was planning a farewell breakfast, content he'd soon be sending the woman back to Narwhal, where she belonged. When she clambered down from the saddle, she offered Chase the reins and declared Topaz was remarkable, truly remarkable, but a little delicate in the withers. Especially for her father.

"Delicate in the withers?" he'd repeated dumbly, as visions of his buttermilk pancakes took flight.

"Perhaps a sturdier horse," Mallory remarked idly, scratching Topaz behind the ears, then stroking her forehead.

His answer to that was Stretch, three years old, sixteen hands and still growing.

Too big, she declared.

Spinner, a five-year-old mare.

Calf-hocked, she announced.

Derby, a five-year-old stallion.

Bench-kneed, she decreed.

Exasperated, Chase scowled down at the impossibly beautiful woman. She was the pickiest lady he'd ever met in his whole life. His stock was nationally acclaimed, for crying out loud. The imperfections she was tossing out were slight, barely a notch short of perfect.

Chase snagged a deep breath, determined to sell Mallory a pony, or die trying. “You know, I’ve got this stunning black mare—”

Mallory threw up her hands in protest. “Oh! No. Absolutely not. I had a black gelding once, and that horse was the trial of my life. Dark as the devil he was. I vowed I’d never have another in the stable.”

He nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “You know, ma’am, I can’t quite get a handle on what you’re looking for.”

“Oh, I’ll know it when I see it,” she said, her voice rising with conviction.

“You sure you didn’t get this Bar C stock mixed up with something else you saw out in California?” he said doubtfully.

“Certainly not.”

“But there’s been nothing that’s interested you at all today,” he complained, wearily glancing to the west, to the setting sun.

“I just haven’t found it yet. I’m looking for something special,” she reiterated. “Something unusual and spunky. It can be less than perfect, but the overall qualities have to be so unique that they make this horse an unforgettable animal. A different kind of horse. Something not of this world.”

Chase didn’t hear the last sentence. He was thinking of Peggy Sue, the pariah who had head-butted him against the wall this morning. Now, there was an unforgettable animal for you. The four-year-old was more than unique, she was a minefield of imperfections—and he’d be switched if he’d show Mallory that contrary little mare.

His reputation would go to hell in a handbasket. He’d be a laughingstock from one end of the country to the other. No matter what, he had to keep her away from Peggy Sue. “We’ll find you something special, Mallory. I guarantee it.”

Chapter Three

With her hands in six inches of dishwater, Mallory stared dismally out the kitchen window, at the bloodred sunset, and wondered if the animal Bob Llewelyn described to her—the one with “mustang” blood running through its veins—honestly did exist. She couldn’t come right out and ask, for fear her questions would arouse suspicion. Had Bob been toying with her? Had he sent her on what Americans called ‘a wild-goose chase’?

It had been three grueling days, and Chase had shown her more than two dozen Morgans. Not one of those animals was the one she wanted to see. She’d hinted that she might purchase three docile animals for the camp—but that was just to keep Chase pacified.

As for buying a horse for her father—or returning it to her father’s estate—she was running out of excuses. And Chase was running out of patience.

Of course, her stay wasn’t all bad, she acknowledged, running the tip of her finger around the rim of Chase’s coffee cup and reminding herself how his sensuous mouth had pressed against the rim only an hour earlier.

The steam from his coffee softened his rough-carved features and made his gray eyes go misty. For one heart-stopping moment during dinner tonight, she lost herself to that gaze. Chase Wells did have the most fascinating way of looking at her over a coffee cup, of following her every move with his eyes. Eyes that crinkled at the corners, and eased up into companionable crescents when he was relaxed. It was an intimacy unlike anything she’d ever experienced.

Not even in the most romantic setting, nor over the most expensive bottle of wine.

She vaguely wondered if that feeling was...desire. If so, she’d have to put a stop to it. She couldn’t afford to become emotionally attached. Not now. Not when she was this close to getting what she wanted.

She heard the back door slam and looked over her shoulder. Chase’s face was contorted with pain, and he had a handkerchief wadded against the back of his hand. Mallory dropped the coffee cup back into the dishwater and grabbed a tea towel.

“What did you do?” she asked, moving toward him.

Chase looked up, apparently surprised she was still in the kitchen. “Oh, I...um—” he grimaced, peeling the bloody handkerchief away from his hand “—got my hand caught in one of the stall doors. Stupid of me.”

Mallory blinked.

Again?

Chase Wells may have been one of the most ruggedly handsome men she’d ever met, but he was also one of the clumsiest. Yesterday, he tripped over a feed bucket and twisted his ankle. The day before he got tangled in a loose cinch strap and caught his shoulder on the tack-room door.

His house was a virtual potpourri of medical supplies. She was constantly moving gauze bandages, Ace bandages, ice packs, heating pads, iodine and antiseptics out of the way.

“Let me see,” she said, peering down at the damage. “You did this in a door?” she asked skeptically.

“Oh...uh...one of the horses got a little feisty, is all. We both went for the door at the same time.”

“Looks like the horse won,” she said dryly, her fingers carefully circling thick bones in his wrist as she led him over to the double sink. “We better wash it off and get some antiseptic,” she advised, automatically turning on the faucet and putting his hand beneath the running water. The warmth of his flesh and the icy-cold rush of water aroused a strange sensation in her middle.

“I’m fine. It’s just a little old scrape,” he grouched, resisting her ministrations.

She looked up at him from beneath lowered lashes. “I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“I know. But—”

“Yes?”

“I don’t need a nursemaid,” he ground out.

Mallory paused and imperceptibly pulled back. “Oh, really?” He winced as she went right ahead and examined his four scraped knuckles and the deep, ragged scratches. Without offering one nuance of sympathy, she reached for the bottle of hydrogen peroxide and poured a generous amount over his wounds. “Then I promise not to,” she said, leaving him to drip dry in the sink as she went to find the gauze bandages.

When she returned, he was staring thoughtfully at the tepid dishwater in the other side of the sink. “You weren’t washing dishes, were you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” She patted his hand dry with the hand towel before slathering ointment on his scrapes. “I consider it a fair exchange for dinner.”

“Right. I’ll bet you’ve never had meat loaf in your whole life.”

Her lips twitched, and she tried not to laugh. She gently wound a length of gauze over his knuckles, but she could feel his eyes on her and it was disconcerting. “No,” she said finally, “I was raised on escargot, lobster with drawn butter and roast duck with orange sauce.”

“Figures.”

Sighing, she rolled her eyes, then tied off the bandage and tossed the gauze on the counter. “You don’t like me very much, do you.”

“Not true. I think you’re the nicest little millionaire—or is that millionairess?—I’ve ever met.”

She looked at him. “Chase,” she said finally, her hand fluttering to his arm, “is it really the money? Does it make you uncomfortable?”

Chase’s mouth went dry. He fumbled with a dozen different answers. None of them would do. The fact was Mallory had been nothing but pleasant. She laughed and the world smiled. She touched him and his heart yammered in his chest.

He looked down at the hand across his forearm.

He couldn’t tell her that was how she made him feel. This constant yammering, whenever she was near, whenever he heard her voice or her laugh.

“I suppose I owe you an apology. Maybe I’m a little inexperienced handling someone of your caliber.”

Mallory’s eyes widened in mock horror. “Handling my...caliber? That does have something to do with guns, doesn’t it? I’m not that explosive, am I?”

Chase’s mouth curled. “Honey, you are one pistol packin’ mama.”

“What?”

“An expression,” he said quickly. “An American expression. For someone who knows how to get what she wants. A little spitfire, someone unpredictable and maybe a little tough.”

“You think I’m...tough...like meat?”

His eyes moved over her lips, and he wondered, insanely, what it would be like to nibble the softness he saw there. “No, not a piece of meat, not at all. All I see is...nice,” he revised. “Tough, as in...determined. Yes, determined, I’ll give you that.”

“Mmm. You make that ‘pistol packin’ mama’ thing sound...desirable.”

Desirable. Not a word choice he needed to hear. Chase hesitated, painfully aware they’d moved imperceptibly closer to each other. His hip was against the countertop; hers was, too. Their bodies seemed to move with a will of their own, leaning, straining nearer. His breathing was shallow, his nerve endings tingled with anticipation.

It would only take one move.

One.

He vaguely wondered if, in Narwhal, they beheaded red-blooded American men for compromising unmarried women?

It just might be worth it.

Mallory drew a deep, cleansing breath, and Chase noticed it was just enough to make her breasts shudder beneath her silky white top.

So. The heady game they were playing was getting to her, too.

"It is desirable," he said huskily. "It's also sexy as hell."

Her eyes widened, as if she was startled and taken completely off guard by the suggestive comment.

"I have to finish the coffee cups," she said abruptly, turning back to the sink and plunging her hands into the dishwater. "Then I'll take a walk before it gets dark and get a little fresh air. Will you join me?"

Chase stared at her profile. The upturned nose, the graceful curve of her jaw. No. Absolutely not. Being in the dark, with a little moonlight and few freckles of stars in a blue-black sky, with a woman like Mallory—a woman who made his hands itch and his blood pound—was an invitation to trouble. "Nah," he said, brushing aside the invitation. "Go ahead. I've got some reading to catch up on."

Mallory tossed the coffee cups in the dish drainer and pulled the plug on the sink. "You're sure?" "Yeah."

A hint of disappointment clouded her features.

She probably wasn't used to being rejected, he thought irritably as he reached for last week's stock market analysis. Either that or she liked to call the shots on everything, even a tumble through the sheets.

Yet, when she strolled out the back door and into the gathering dusk, it was he who experienced the greatest regret.

Chase couldn't concentrate; nothing he'd read made any sense. Mallory was probably fine, but he shouldn't have let her go out by herself. He glanced at the clock. She'd been gone almost an hour, and it was dark. Maybe she'd started talking to one of the hands; they followed her like lapdogs whenever they had the chance. Gabe, a fresh-faced twenty-year-old, loved to brag to her about his bull-riding exploits. Tony, with a couple of drops of Spanish blood running through his veins, had started wearing clean shirts and peppering his sentences with "señorita" every time she was near—as if he'd been raised across the border instead of in Boise.

Tossing the paperwork on the table, he stretched his legs, crossing one booted foot over the other. He may as well admit it, the woman was wreaking havoc with his senses and with his life. When she went home, he imagined he and his ranch hands would feel as if someone had taken the plug out of the fourteen-karat sunshine she seemed to spread.

She sure knew her horses, he'd give her that. She may have claimed she didn't want blue-ribbon horseflesh, but all her petty criticisms said otherwise. He grinned, remembering her lame excuse for not wanting Pritchett, the last mare he'd offered her.

Her ears were just a little "too pointy." Yep. Pointy ears would get you every time.

Chase flexed his hand and studied the bandage, remembering the way Mallory's fingers brushed against the sensitive spot inside his wrist as she examined his palm. His flesh still tingled, nearly blotting out all the pain.

Huh. The way Peggy Sue was having at him, she made him look like a beat-up cowpoke who didn't have one lick of horse sense. Yesterday she'd stomped on his instep, the day before she'd charged him, catching his shoulder against the wall. The duplicitous little vixen had astounding strength, even though she was so sickly, most days she could barely hold her head up. It was time to make a decision about what to do with her—and the sooner the better. She was beginning to be a risk, even a liability. His reasons for keeping her were beginning to dwindle and fade.

He flexed his hand again and grimaced. He didn't know why he was spending so much of his time thinking about Mallory, because it was Peggy Sue who was leaving her mark on him.

Painfully he hauled himself out of the chair and dragged his weary body over to the door. Snagging his hat from the peg, he pulled it low over his eyes. "Time to find the little woman," he muttered.

The moment he stepped out on the back porch and saw that the sliding door to the east barn had been pushed open, a feeling of dread washed over him. The overhead light inside the barn was on. He immediately forgot his pain, and his boot heels barely hit the stair treads as he picked up the pace.

The moment he slipped inside the barn he knew. He could hear Mallory's soft, crooning voice. He heard Peggy Sue whicker in answer. His heart did a double-time dance in his chest, and his blood went cold.

If anything happened to her...

The door to Peggy Sue's stall was open. Chase's knees went weak.

Barely breathing, he inched down the alleyway, until he was even with her stall.

Peggy Sue immediately tossed her magnificent white head, going wild-eyed, as her nose curled to expose bared teeth. The filly, even though she was on the small side, carried herself with a regal, haughty stature. Her alabaster coat faded into steel gray dappling over her rump. Her long mane and tail, also white, was tangled and dirty.

"Whoa, baby, what's the matter?" Mallory murmured. With her back to Chase, she stood at Peggy Sue's withers, and ran a hand down her neck. In her opposite hand she held a currycomb.

"Mallory," Chase said quietly, "get out of that stall now."

Mallory whirled, surprised by his entrance. "I found her, Chase," she said breathlessly, her face animated. "The one I want. This is it! This is the horse I've been looking for!"

Behind her, Peggy Sue startled, her front feet coming a foot off the ground.

"Mallory, I said get out of that stall. Now."

Mallory lost her balance and stumbled as Peggy Sue bumped her shoulders, her back. But Mallory, unfazed, squared off, planting her feet. "She's wonderful, she's spirited, she's—"

"She's going to kill you. Now, get out."

Mallory's eyes flashed and she straightened. "Don't be silly," she laughed. "I don't care what this horse costs. I have to have her. She's all I've ever imagined—and more."

Chase's muscles tensed. "You don't know what you're dealing with, Mallory."

"Oh, but I do," she said, leaning back and affectionately sinking her shoulder blades against Peggy Sue's neck. Chase's eyes briefly shuttered closed, willing the animal not to swing around and take a sizable bite out of her. "This horse is the thing legends are made of," she said, her voiced filled with awe. "She's a descendant of European stock. Her neck. Her head. Her coloring."

"That horse," Chase warned, his voice low, the cadence carefully measured, "is the meanest, orneriest she-devil this side of the Mississippi. She's got mixed blood in her. Mustang and Morgan. And she's not for sale. She's sick and mean and crazy. Now, either you get out of that stall, or I'm taking you out."

Mallory's face fell. "Chase, she's sick...I can see that...but this animal's spirit..."

"Mallory, I'm warning you."

She stared at him, then she tried a different tack. "Chase, she'll have the best vets! The best of everything. I'll see to it. Hey, girl, when I get you home..." She playfully slapped Peggy Sue on the shoulder.

Peggy Sue jumped, a dangerous whicker rumbling through her gaunt white sides.

"Don't," Chase spat, clenching his hands. "You're going to spook her, and then there'll be hell to pay." He stepped one foot inside the stall.

Peggy Sue whirled her great head in his direction, as if daring him. The motion knocked Mallory off her planted feet, and the currycomb sailed across the stall.

"Mallory, for your own safety and well-being—"

Peggy Sue laid her ears back, giving the illusion that two flat wings flanked her forelock. The knotty protrusion on her forehead was exposed, and it vaguely resembled a devil's horn. Chase had nightmares about her goring him with it. The vet said he didn't think the bone malformation caused her pain—yet pain was the only logical explanation for the mare's rages, her unpredictable behavior. Ever since Skylar had died...

As if reading his mind, Peggy Sue's eyes went hard, glassy, as she fixed her relentless gaze on him.

Chase drew a deep, cleansing breath and experimentally moved his shoulder. He had firsthand knowledge that Peggy Sue could go berserk before either of them could bat an eyelash. He prayed for the strength to whisk Mallory away. God knows, the horse could kill her.

He took another step, this time on his bad leg, the one she'd kicked the bejeebers out of a week ago.

Mallory looked up at Peggy Sue's unforgiving countenance. The shadow of a doubt immediately crossed her brow. "All right, all right," she said quickly. "I'll fill her grain bucket and then..." Mallory moved to the front of the stall, leaving the space between Peggy Sue and Chase wide open.

Peggy Sue saw the moment as an opportunity. The muscles in her neck and her shoulders twitched with anticipation. She pawed the ground and lowered her head.

"Easy, girl," Chase intoned, lifting a hand.

Pivoting on her hind legs, Peggy Sue reared four feet off the ground. Mallory gasped, but held fast, instinctively putting her hand up to catch Peggy Sue's halter.

Peggy Sue snorted, shouldering Mallory aside, so she could have at Chase. She faced him, blind with rage, as she cornered Mallory at the back of the stall.

Chase dashed forward, concerned Mallory would fall victim to Peggy Sue's slashing hooves. The animal was deadly. He'd have to have her put down; she wasn't right.

He moved toward the manger, and Peggy Sue's rump swung away from Mallory as she followed him.

"Mallory, get out of the corner," he ordered. "Now!"

Mallory slipped around Peggy Sue, and Chase moved farther into the stall so Mallory could exit. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I'm fine! You don't understand," she said behind him. "She'd never hurt me. It's her nature, she knows I'm—"

Looking over his shoulder at Mallory, Chase never saw it coming. But he heard Peggy Sue whirl before her two rock-hard hooves caught his side and propelled him against the wall. In the recesses of his mind, he heard Mallory scream—and in one insane flash of recognition he felt inordinately grateful it was he who had taken the blow. The air whooshed out of him, collapsing his lungs into aching sacks of tissue.

It was then he knew the ultimate meaning of "being hit by a two-by-four." The pine walls of Peggy Sue's stall smashed against his backside; he slowly slithered down them, as if the bones had been removed from his body, and he sank onto the straw-covered floor in a mangled blob of body parts.

"Chase! Chase!"

His hearing had been rearranged; it was if the sounds were coming from deep inside his head. His eyes fastened on the strangest things—a loose nail protruding from the manger, a small split in Peggy Sue's hoof, the dainty toe of Mallory's boot, the curve of her jeans as they stretched over her bent knee. He lay there, wondering if he was breathing, wondering if that was what made him hurt so much.

"Chase, answer me!"

Over the scent of straw and manure and horseflesh, he smelled her sweet perfume. Wildflowers on a summer day. The overhead light circled a mane of blond hair, and he looked, dumbly, into the most angelic face he'd ever seen.

"You are so beautiful," he mumbled thickly, tasting blood, his teeth feeling loose in his head. He heard the shrill, agonizing warning of a horse named Peggy Sue.

Mallory looked up and over her shoulder at the monstrous beast that pawed the air above them. "We've got to get you out of here," she said, slipping her hands beneath his armpits and dragging him from the stall. She dumped him on the hard-packed dirt floor.

His eyes shut, he heard the gate close with a bang and the latch pin sliding into the slot. He lay there, fading in and out of consciousness.

Peggy Sue continued to fuss, her back hooves splintering the boards of her box stall. He'd have to patch it up again. My God, that was one contrary horse.

He felt hands flutter over him, touching him. Sliding down his arms, his legs. Loosening his belt, unsnapping his shirt. For a moment, Chase wondered if these were heavenly ministrations. Maybe someone was putting him back together. It didn't matter, it was glorious and comforting. Whatever was happening kindled a tingling that surfaced through the pain. He wanted more of it. He didn't want it to stop.

He struggled to open his eyes. Colors blurred together in a haze of pain and pleasure. Focusing on a full, sensuous mouth, he vaguely recognized lips that belonged to Mallory. For a moment that surprised him, and he wondered what had happened to Sharon, his ex-wife. She should have been yelling at him by now.

"Talk to me," Mallory whispered, her hands stirring anxiously over his chest, his shoulders, his neck. "Tell me you're okay. Talk to me," she implored. "Say something. Anything."

He opened his mouth but only coughed, pitifully strangling on a rush of air.

"I'm so sorry. I should have known." Her voice caught as she stroked his temple, his cheek. "What can I do? Tell me."

Chase went all sappy inside, then he said the first idiotic thing that went zinging through his muddled head. "Could you...could you...kiss it and make it better?" he mumbled.

She stared at him for a split second before swiveling a glance up at that idiotic horse, Peggy Sue, who was locked inside the box stall. For a moment it appeared indecision raged inside Mallory's head, then her lips swooped down over his, covering them with sweet, sweet heat. Fireworks exploded behind his eyelids...and he knew he'd died and gone to cowboy heaven.

Chapter Four

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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