MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

Taming a Dark Horse

STELLA BAGWELL

Stella Bagwell
Taming a Dark Horse

Аннотация

NICE, REASONABLE, DEDICATED AND COMPLETELY QUALIFIED–NO WOMAN LIKE THAT WOULD BE WILLING TO LIVE WITH HIM.Linc Ketchum hadn't been a pussycat before the fire at the T Bar K burned his hands, but now he was next to impossible. And he knew no woman would put up with him, especially not Nevada Ortiz, the so-called nurse that Linc's cousin had sent to take care of him. She was unexpectedly pretty and smarth-mouthed to boot. Her jet-black hair and creamy brown skin were a serious distraction, not to mention the feelings that she stirred up. Like any cowboy, Linc hated to admit he might be wrong, but Nevada's tender loving care was slowly changing his mind about women. Or one woman, in particular….

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“Don’t worry, I’ve done this very thing many times before,”

she said as she reached for the button on the waistband of his jeans.

He sucked in a hard breath. “I’ll bet.”

Nevada looked up at him with hard brown eyes. “That’s the second time you’ve implied that I’m promiscuous. What gave you that idea?”

“You. You said you had boyfriends. Or did I misunderstand you?”

With a shake of her head, she focused her gaze on the fly of his jeans. “No. You didn’t misunderstand. And aren’t you glad I’ve got experience? Otherwise I might just get you all tangled up in this zipper.”

Linc started to growl a warning to her but the loud sound of the zipper peeling open caused his mouth to snap shut. Now wasn’t the time to press his luck. But if she didn’t step away from him soon, he was going to do something crazy. Like grab her and kiss her until she couldn’t say one more sassy word to him.

Dear Reader,

Well, it’s September, which always sounds like a fresh start to me, no matter how old I get. And evidently we have six women this month who agree. In Home Again by Joan Elliott Pickart, a

woman who can't have children has decided to work with them in a professional capacity—but when she is assigned an orphaned little boy, she fears she's in over her head. Then she meets his gorgeous guardian—and she's sure of it!

In the next installment of MOST LIKELY TO…, The Measure of a Man by Marie Ferrarella, a single mother attempting to help her beloved former professor joins forces with a former campus golden boy, now the college…custodian. What could have happened? Allison Leigh's The Tycoon's Marriage Bid pits a pregnant secretary against her ex-boss who, unbeknownst to him, has a real connection to her baby's father. In The Other Side of Paradise by Laurie Paige, next up in her SEVEN DEVILS miniseries, a mysterious woman seeking refuge as a ranch hand learns that she may have more ties to the community than she could have ever suspected. When a beautiful nurse is assigned to care for a devastatingly handsome, if cantankerous, cowboy, the results are…well, you get the picture—but you can have it spelled out for you in Stella Bagwell's next MEN OF THE WEST book, Taming a Dark Horse. And in Undercover Nanny by Wendy Warren, a domestically challenged female detective decides it's necessary to penetrate the lair of single father and heir to a grocery fortune by pretending to be… his nanny. Hmm. It could work.…

So enjoy, and snuggle up. Fall weather is just around the corner.…

Happy reading!

Gail Chasan
Senior Editor

Taming a Dark Horse
Stella Bagwell

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To our own beloved horses:
Thunder, Trouble, Spider John, Diamond,
Rooster, Topper, Shy Girl, Badger, Miss Kitty,
Potion, Major Bob, Festus, Newly, Doll Brown,
Sante Fe Solid, Maggie and the baby on the way.

And also, in loving memory of Gus, my brother's great trail horse.

STELLA BAGWELL

sold her first book to Silhouette in November 1985. More than fifty novels later, she still loves her job and says she isn't completely content unless she's writing. Recently, she and her husband of more than thirty years moved from the hills of Oklahoma to Seadrift, Texas, a sleepy little fishing town located on the coastal bend. Stella says the water, the tropical climate and the seabirds make it a lovely place to let her imagination soar and to put the stories in her head down on paper.

She and her husband have one son, Jason, who lives and teaches high school math in nearby Port Lavaca.

HOW TO TAME A DARK HORSE:

1 Approach him with caution—he's an animal of flight.

2 Don't try to rope him too quickly—let him run until he tires.

3 When he starts to show interest, give him your shoulder—he'll want what he thinks he can't have.

4 When he decides to get close, talk to him—sweet whispered words in his ear will calm his fearful heart.

5 Once he allows you to touch him, show him you'll never hurt him—stroke him gently on his cheek and along his neck.

6 And finally, when he surrenders to you, give him a sugary treat—he'll love you for a lifetime.

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Chapter One

"A nurse! Hell no! I don't need a nurse! I just need to get out of here!"

Linc Ketchum's loud protest rattled around the small hospital room. Normally he considered himself a quiet, unobtrusive guy, but since the terrible fire at the T Bar K horse barn two weeks ago he'd turned into a growling bear.

His tall, graying doctor gave him a stern look. "Sorry, Mr. Ketchum, but your hands and arms were badly burned and unless I'm assured that a nurse will be with you at all times, I cannot release you from this hospital. And that means round the clock. You're still highly susceptible to infection and I don't want any sort of pressure placed on your hands before they heal completely. Your bandages will have to be changed routinely and your skin dressed. I want to know that it's done correctly."

Linc looked up at Dr. Olstead. "Hell, doc, if you're going to force me to have a nurse underfoot, I might as well stay in the hospital."

"I can certainly arrange that. As far as I'm concerned I'd rather have you here. But your family seems to think you'll heal better at home."

Grimacing, Linc glanced down at the sheets covering the lower half of his body. Except for short walks down the hall and sitting for brief spells in an armchair, he'd been stuck in this bed

for too long. His whole body was beginning to ache. And that was just the physical side of things. Staring at the close, pale-green walls and the small television screen hanging in one corner of the room was enough to send him to the psychiatric ward. If he didn't get out of here soon he was going to start yelling and never stop.

"All right, doc. Whatever you say. If I have to have a nurse—well, guess there's not much I can do about it. At least I'll be getting out of here." He lifted his heavily bundled hands and arms. The stiff white objects reminded him of a couple of pesky tree stumps in an otherwise clean pasture. If he had to button his jeans without assistance, or walk out of the hospital naked, he'd be forced to choose the latter. "I want to get out of this mess, doc. I want to get back to work."

"I'm going to cut the bandaging down soon," the doctor assured him, "but it will be at least two or three more weeks before I'll even consider allowing you to go back to work."

Linc opened his mouth to protest, but the doctor jumped in before he could say a word and went on to discuss the do's and don'ts he wanted Linc to stick to once he was released from the hospital.

When the man finally left the room, Linc was overwhelmed and just a little angry at being put in such a vulnerable state. He was a man who had never needed or asked for anything. He took care of himself and had done so from the time he was a teenager. He didn't like depending on other people for anything. But it

appeared as though in the coming days he was going to have to do a lot of things he didn't like.

The memories of the fire that had brought him here suddenly welled up in Linc's head. He saw flames ripping at the walls of the horse barn and licking at the gates to each stable, the terrified horses rearing and pawing as they tried to escape the fire closing in around them. Their frightened squeals and whinnies had mixed with the loud roar of the crackling flames and the horrible sound still continued to wake Linc from his sleep. And though he tried to forget, he couldn't get anything about that nightmarish night out of his mind.

Time after time, he'd run back into the burning barn, grabbing every mare that he could and opening stall gates that were being eaten up by the creeping fire. The only thing he had to be thankful for was that all his beloved horses had gotten out safely. Only one had been slightly burned and his cousin Ross had assured him that she was well on the mend. As for Linc, the ordeal had pretty much cooked his hands and arms. But when he thought of his mares and colts and stallion, he knew saving them was worth every second of the pain he was going through now.

"Well, we've finally gotten some good news," Ross said now as he and his sister Victoria entered the room. "At least you're getting out of here tomorrow. That's something to look forward to."

Ross Ketchum was Linc's cousin. The two of them were almost the same age and had grown up together on the Ketchum's

T Bar K ranch. They shared the responsibilities of running the multi-million-dollar operation. In spite of Ross being talkative and outgoing and Linc liking his privacy, the two of them were more like brothers than anything else. They even shared the same physical characteristics: long legs, a lean torso full of muscles, dark-brown hair and green eyes. Only, Linc's hair was lighter than Ross's and his eyes a much darker, muddier green.

"Yeah," Linc mumbled. "But where the hell am I going to go? I'd drive the boys in the bunkhouse crazy and I can't have a nurse wandering around a bunch of naked cowboys in the mornings. Unless it was a male nurse."

Victoria Hastings, Ross's sister and a practicing medical doctor, looked at him and laughed. "I don't think any nurse would be welcome in the bunkhouse."

"Only if it was Nurse Goodbody," Ross jokingly interjected.

Victoria rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Ross, our cousin doesn't need a Nurse Goodbody. He needs good care and rest."

"And that's just what he's going to get, sis." Standing at the head of Linc's bed, Ross grinned down at him. "As soon as he moves into the big house with me and Bella."

"Oh no! That's your place. I'm not butting in."

The main ranch house had been built nearly fifty years earlier by Linc's father, Randolf, and Ross's father, Tucker. Back then, the two Ketchum men had been partners, each of them owning half of the T Bar K, a spread that covered several sections in northwestern New Mexico. Initially, both men and their wives

had lived together in the monstrous house built of rock and logs. But eventually Randolf had developed heart disease, sold his half to his brother and built a modest house across the ridge from the main estate.

His cousins Seth, Ross and Victoria had always treated Linc as a sibling. All three of them had insisted he always have access to the Ketchum house and the ranch's funds just as if he were their brother. Linc had always been grateful for their generosity, but he'd never taken advantage of it. He was his own man. And he wanted to be able to say he'd earned what he had by hard work, not by handouts.

"Damn it, Linc. The house is yours, too," Ross said now. "It belongs to all of us. Bella and I just happen to be living in it. And you don't have to be told there's plenty of empty rooms in the place. In fact, there's so many Bella doesn't know what to do with them."

Mutiny tightened Linc's jaw as he looked up at his cousin. "You can fill those empty rooms with kids. That would be a damn sight better than hosting a helpless cowboy who can't even button his own jeans."

Ross chuckled. "We're trying to fill them with kids, Linc. But that takes time, you know. It will take us a while to fill that many rooms."

"Well, I'm not going to be underfoot," Linc grumbled. "You and Bella are still newlyweds, you need to be alone."

"Tell that to Marina," Victoria wryly interjected.

Marina had been the cook-housekeeper for the Ketchum family since Linc and his cousins had been born. The large Hispanic woman knew more about all of them than they did themselves. She had an extra soft spot for Ross and didn't make any bones about showing it. Nor did she worry about speaking her mind. And no doubt she would demand to help care for Linc.

"That's another thing," Ross quickly put in. "In the big house Marina will be available to the nurse and—"

"No!" Linc interrupted. "Marina already has too much to do. I'll not be piling more problems on her old shoulders."

"Damn it, Linc, you're acting like a child."

Since Linc couldn't use either hand or elbow, it took some doing for him to lever himself off the mattress, but he finally managed to sit up and glare hotly at his cousin. "All right, you cocky bastard. If you think—"

"Stop it! Stop it right now!" Victoria shouted at the two men. "There's no need for all this arguing."

"You're damn right, there's not," Ross said flatly. "Linc is going to do what I say!"

"Like hell!" Linc muttered.

Victoria interceded once again. "That's enough. Nobody is going to make Linc do something he doesn't want to do," she said to Ross and then resting her hands on the footboard of the bed, she leaned toward Linc and smiled encouragingly. "I have the solution, Linc. Your parents' old house is empty. Grady, the foreman on the fence-building crew moved out a week ago. He

bought a place of his own. So we'll have the house clean and ready for you by tomorrow."

Relief washed over Linc's face. "Victoria, you're a real darlin'."

"My husband tells me that very same thing everyday," she teased, then walked to the head of the bed, where she bent down and placed a kiss on Linc's clammy forehead. "Don't worry, cuz, I'm not going to let anyone badger you. Especially my mean ol' brother."

"Aw, Victoria, quit babying the man," Ross complained, but there was a half grin on his face to soften his words. "You'll have him so spoiled by the time he gets well, he'll be worthless to all of us."

This time Linc didn't let Ross's jabs rile him. Now that he knew where he was going to go once he was released from the hospital, there was another pressing problem on his mind.

"Sounds good, Victoria, but what about a nurse? I can't imagine any woman wanting to stay out at the ranch. Especially not round the clock."

Victoria frowned at him. "Why not? The ranch is beautiful. And even though the house isn't anything fancy, it's very nice."

Linc shrugged as memories of his mother pushed at the edges of his thoughts. Darla had hated the ranch. The dust, the livestock, the isolation and the constant work it took from her husband to make the place go. He could still remember her arguing fiercely with his father and constantly throwing in his

face threats to leave him and the whole mess behind.

Eventually his mother had left the ranch. But not until his father had died from the heart disease that had slowly debilitated him. Linc had been a young teenager when his father had finally passed away and at the time he'd often wondered why Darla bothered to hang around. She'd obviously not given a hoot for her husband. And she had not shown much more concern for Linc. She'd been content to let him run loose on the ranch and more or less take care of himself.

Darla had remarried quickly after his father's death and to his amazement, she'd demanded that Linc move to the east coast with her and her new husband. If the idea hadn't been so ludicrous it would have been laughable. Linc had lived his whole life on the T Bar K. He'd grown up with cousins who were his own age. The place was his home and would always be his home. He wasn't about to move to some city, away from everything he loved. So he'd chosen to stay behind and his mother had walked away without a backward glance.

"Well, yeah," he finally said to Victoria. "But some women—"

"I'm not going to hire just some woman," Victoria assured him. "If she isn't nice and reasonable, dedicated and completely qualified, then she isn't going to step foot on the ranch. Understand?"

Linc wanted to tell her that there wasn't any such woman of that sort who'd be willing to live under the same roof with him, even in a nurse/patient situation. But he kept his mouth shut. He'd

already done enough arguing and complaining and Victoria was doing the best she could. At the very least, he was grateful.

"Where are you going to find a woman like that?" Ross questioned his sister. "They don't grow on trees around here, you know."

She made a face at her brother. "I am a doctor, remember? I do have sources. Trust me, I'll find one."

Quickly skirting the bed, Ross looped his arm through Victoria's and tugged her toward the door. "Sounds like a big job to me. You'd better get out of here and get started on it. Linc and I have important things to discuss."

"I hope it's horses," Linc said from his seat on the bed. "Because I'm sure sick of discussing nurses!"

"Oh, all right, I'm out of here," Victoria said with a helpless shake of her head. "But just remember, Linc, you can't get back to work until you heal. And you'll need a nurse to get you there."

"Yeah. Well, I guess a man can stand most anything if he has to," Linc muttered.

***

Later that afternoon, Nevada Ortiz was in the middle of trying to immunize a baby boy, who was displaying a whale of a screaming fit, when her boss, Dr. Victoria Hastings called to her.

"Nevada, as soon as you're finished there, I want to see you in my office."

Nevada swiped the baby's thigh with an alcohol square and tried to still his kicking foot.

“What about Mr. Buckhorn?” Nevada called to her. “He’s in the waiting room and Joyce says he already went outside twice to smoke a cigarette.”

Clearly frustrated, Victoria let out a sigh. “All right. I’ll finish up with him and then I’ll see you in my office.”

“She sounds like she means business,” the young woman holding the baby said. “What have you done wrong, Nevada?”

Since Aztec, New Mexico, was a small town, almost everyone was acquainted with each other. And since Nevada had worked as a nurse in Aztec for six of her twenty-five years, she’d met lots of people, including the young mother holding squalling Henry.

Nevada shrugged and smiled. “Not too much today. But little Henry may disagree.” She rubbed the spot on the baby’s thigh where she’d injected him, and after about two seconds his cries were replaced with a dimpled smile. “Now see there,” she told the boy, “that wasn’t so bad, was it? And look what you get now.”

Reaching into her uniform pocket, she pulled out a red lollipop, removed the cellophane and handed the treat to the baby. Grabbing it, he let out a happy coo and Nevada patted his cheek.

“Be sure that you watch him for any signs of fever or rash,” she told the mother. “Since this is a booster, I don’t expect him to have any problems, but if he does, go ahead and give us a call.”

“I will. Thank you, Nevada.”

Once she was sure mother and baby were on their way out of the examining room, Nevada hurried to the front of the building

to retrieve Mr. Buckhorn's chart from the hundreds that filled the shelves on a wall behind the receptionist's desk.

Leaning down, she whispered in Joyce's ear, "Has he been outside again? Or just having a cussing fit?"

The receptionist didn't have to be told that Nevada was talking about Mr. Buckhorn. He was the only patient left in the waiting room.

"Neither, thank God," the receptionist answered. "I turned the television on to the Western channel. Sunset Carson is keeping him occupied."

Smiling, Nevada picked up the elderly man's chart and walked to the door of the waiting room. "Mr. Buckhorn, you can come back now," she called to him.

The old Navajo slowly turned his head and leveled an annoyed look at her. "I've already waited too long, young lady." He jabbed a finger in the direction of the television. "I gotta see what this cowboy is gonna do with this gunslinger."

"He's going to shoot him, that's what," Nevada told him. "And Dr. Hastings is going to shoot you if you don't get back here. She doesn't have time to wait around on old men like you."

Mumbling what sounded like Navajo curse words, the old man slapped a beat-up cowboy hat on his head and slowly rose to his feet. By the time he made it to Nevada, though, he was in a better mood and his wide, wrinkled grin made his dark eyes sparkle playfully.

"I'm not so old, missy. I have a girlfriend. See her every day,

too."

"Smells like you have a cigarette every day, too. You know that Doc is gonna be angry with you."

His chuckles were full of mischief. "She'll get over it."

***

More than thirty minutes later, Nevada was finally able to meet with Victoria. The day had been long and both women were exhausted. Nevada practically fell into the stuffed armchair sitting near the doctor's wide desk.

"What a day!" Nevada exclaimed. "How many patients did we see anyway?"

Victoria tried to smile. "I quit counting after we hit twenty."

Reaching up, Nevada began to pull the pins from the braided black bun at the back of her head. Once the last one was removed, the long silky strands fell to her shoulders, and she gave the heavy mane a shake.

"So, what have I done now?" Nevada asked her boss. "Made a patient angry? I know Mr. Tallman complained about the shot I gave him. But honestly, Victoria, the man is a wimp."

Leaning back in her chair, Victoria chuckled tiredly. "You haven't done a thing wrong, Nevada. And you're right, he is a wimp. But none of that is why I wanted to talk to you this evening."

Nevada looked at her boss with interest. "Oh? What's happened? Are you going to take off work or something?"

Victoria slowly shook her head. "Actually, I probably should

take off work. But right now it's just not feasible. Dr. Martinez is out of town on vacation and won't be back for one more week. I have no one to replace me. At least, no one that I would trust with my patients." Folding her hands atop the desk, she leaned up and looked intently at Nevada. "You see, I'm having a problem. I'm hunting a dependable nurse. Someone I can really count on."

Shocked, Nevada stared at the other woman. "Oh. You mean, uh—you think I can't handle all the work around here? I thought you and I worked well together."

Victoria quickly waved a hand at her. "Nevada, my dear, I couldn't do without you. You're my right arm. And I really don't know how I'm going to get through the next few weeks if you agree to this."

"This?" Nevada asked carefully. "What is this?"

Massaging her forehead, Victoria said, "I need you to do me a favor. A big favor."

"Of course. Anything," Nevada quickly agreed.

"Wait a minute," Victoria said as her hand fell away from her face. "You'd better hear me out before you agree. This might be a project you won't want to get yourself into."

Nevada scooted onto the edge of her seat. "You've got me curious now. And you know how much I love challenges."

Chuckling, Victoria said, "Well, I have a feeling this will be one. You know my cousin Linc was burned badly in the barn fire at the ranch."

Nevada nodded soberly. "Yes. How is he doing?"

“Actually, he’s going to be released from the hospital tomorrow.”

Nevada shot her boss a bright smile. “That’s good news. From what you told me, his burns were very serious. He must be doing much better.”

“He is. And Ross and I persuaded the doctor that he’d do even better if he was allowed to go home. The doctor agreed. But only if we could find a nurse to stay with him round the clock. I thought of you.”

“Me!” Nevada’s hand fluttered to her chest. “Victoria! I—I couldn’t.”

Victoria leveled a wry look at her. “You just told me you would do anything.”

“Yes, I did. But I didn’t have any idea you’d be asking something like this. I don’t even know your cousin! And I’d practically be living with the man!”

“You would be living with him,” Victoria corrected. “He can’t be left alone. He can’t use his hands in any way. Not yet. So you can imagine how much care he’s going to need.”

“Yes, I can imagine.” Nevada felt awful for Linc Ketchum. Even though she’d never met the man, she understood the pain and suffering he must be going through. She’d attended to many burn patients over her years of nursing and she understood the care he would need. But she didn’t really want to leave her home for two or three weeks. And living with a man? Well, she’d always been adventurous but that was taking it a bit too far.

"But I really don't think I'm the nurse you need."

"You're exactly the nurse Linc needs. These injuries haven't just disabled him physically, they've tugged him down emotionally. Normally, Linc is a gentle, easygoing man. Everyone admires and loves him. But this morning he actually cussed at Ross. He needs to get his mind off the fire and off his confinement. If anyone can do that, you can."

Nevada let out an incredulous laugh. "How? By playing dominos or poker with the man? Victoria, I don't know anything about him. I wouldn't even know how to talk to him."

Smiling, Victoria said, "You? Not know how to talk to a man? Come on, my dear, that sort of thing comes to you naturally."

"That's another thing. I have a life here in town. How could I go out on dates if I'm stuck on the T Bar K? You know that I have boyfriends. They won't understand."

"If that's the case, you don't need them."

A long sigh slipped past Nevada's lips. She'd tried, but she could see there was no talking Victoria out of this. "You really mean this, don't you?"

"Nevada. I can't think of anyone better," she said with a soft voice. "No one else would suit Linc. He's a man who needs gentle care."

Nevada studied Victoria's face and could easily see the signs of worry etching her eyes and mouth. "You love your cousin very much, don't you?"

Victoria nodded. "I always have. Linc is special—to all of

us. He's like our brother. And yet he's always wanted to remain independent. I don't know why. But he's a strong, compassionate man and it makes me want to sob when I see him like he is now."

Feeling her eyes grow misty, Nevada walked around the desk and place a hand on Victoria's slender shoulder. "Don't worry. You should know I'll take on the job. I can't say no to you even when I want to."

Victoria looked up at her gratefully. "Don't do this just for me, Nevada. Do it for Linc. Okay?"

Uneasiness rippled through Nevada and made her hesitate. But only for a moment and then she smiled. "All right. I'll do this for Linc."

Chapter Two

He was sitting on the porch of his father's old house when a little white sports car covered with the red dust of T Bar K land pulled to a stop a few feet from the rail fence that enclosed the house and yard, a yard which was little more than a patch of raw mountain land filled with boulders, pine trees and sagebrush.

Rising slowly from his chair, Linc ambled toward the fence as his squinted eyes tried to make out the person behind the dusty windshield. And as he waited for the nurse to climb out of the vehicle he told himself it didn't matter what sort of person this woman was just so long as she stayed out of his hair as much as possible.

The door to the car finally swung open and Linc caught the glimpse of jeans-clad legs and long, raven-black hair being blown by the evening breeze.

He watched her catch her flyaway hair with a brown hand as she turned to greet him.

"Hello," she called cheerfully. "I guess you must be Linc."

Dear God, what had Victoria done to him, he wondered. This woman wasn't a nurse. She couldn't be. She was very young and looked more like a sexy siren than a caregiver. Her petite body had more curves than the mountain road leading up to the house and her face was full of dimples, sparkling brown eyes and lips the color of a ripe cherry. This was not the sort of woman he

needed sleeping across the hall from him.

"That would be me," he replied, while wondering how he could tell her to go home and still be polite about it.

She walked up to him and smiled. "I'd offer you my hand. But since you can't take it, I'll just say I'm glad to be here."

Topping her jeans was a red jersey shirt that had slipped down on one shoulder. On her small feet were wedge sandals tall enough to break her ankles. Linc couldn't prevent his gaze from climbing up from her painted toenails to the top of her head and back down again. "Where did Victoria find you?" he asked rudely.

The blunt question lifted Victoria's delicate black brows. "Well, not out of a hole if that's what you're thinking. I'm her nurse. I figured you knew that. Haven't you ever been to Victoria's clinic?"

He shook his head while hating the fact that she was making him feel downright stupid. "I don't ever need to be doctored." He frowned as his gaze focused on his bandaged hands. "At least, not until the fire."

"Well, you must be very lucky," Nevada said while her eyes took in the sight of Victoria's cousin.

He practically glowered at her and lifted the thick white bandages directly in front of her face.

"Lucky? You call this lucky?"

Unaffected by his sarcasm, she nodded. "If you've lived all these years without needing a doctor's care, you're a very

fortunate man, Linc Ketchum. And as for those—" she inclined her head toward his burns, "better your hands than your whole body being toasted."

She was right and he knew it, but that didn't make him feel any better. Still, he thanked God that he'd gotten out of the fire before it had consumed him.

"Yeah," he said, then walking around her, he peered into the car's back seat. It was piled with enough luggage to fill two closets. His jaw tightened. "It looks like you've come to stay."

Turning slightly toward him, Nevada frowned. "Of course I've come to stay. You need someone here with you at all times."

He drew in a bracing breath then blew it out. "Well, I don't want to sound rude, but I don't think you're gonna be that person."

She whirled completely around to stare at him. "What?"

He shrugged as a sheepish expression stole over his lean face. Normally he went to great lengths to handle people gently, the same way he handled his horses. But this firebrand standing in front of him was scratching his hackles in the wrong direction.

"I said I don't think you're the right person to stay with me."

Nevada's eyes narrowed as her hands came to rest on either side of her waist. "You don't, huh? Well, just what sort of person would you like to have staying with you?" she asked in a voice that dripped sweetness.

"None! Damn it. I can get along without anybody's help. And I have no idea why Victoria sent you up here! I don't even believe

you're a nurse!"

Nevada folded her arms against her breasts. This outburst from her patient wasn't too big a surprise. Victoria had already warned her that since the fire Linc had been on a rampage. And she'd heard a long time ago that the man was a recluse. She'd asked Victoria about the hearsay and the doctor had confirmed it as true, saying she couldn't remember the last time Linc Ketchum had ever stepped foot off the T Bar K. Poor man, Nevada thought. He really needed her help.

"Why not?" she asked simply.

He stepped closer and it was then that Nevada allowed herself to really look at him. When she'd first driven up, she'd gotten the impression of long legs, muscles and shoulders broad enough to carry her weight twice over. Now she could study his face close up and as far as she was concerned it was a work of pure art.

A Roman nose, square jaw and chin, and dark-green eyes set beneath a pair of black brows. At the moment he was wearing a cowboy hat the color of creamed coffee, but she could see the hair next to it was slightly darker and curled against his head in a touch-me-please way. Victoria had told her that Linc was thirty-eight and all Nevada could think at the moment was what a hunk of a man Linc Ketchum had grown into in those thirty-eight years.

"Because you don't look like a nurse. Or sound like one, either," he answered.

Nevada couldn't help but laugh. "Really? I guess you must be

an expert on nurses?"

He grimaced. "No. But—"

Nevada stepped forward and put her hand on his shoulder. It was warm, rock-hard and caused her skin to sizzle.

"Listen, Linc. Victoria tried to find a nurse other than me. She couldn't. No one was willing to come all the way out here and stay for two weeks."

"That's not surprising," Linc muttered. "If a woman has to go without electricity for one hour, she thinks she's been traumatized."

"Hmm. Is that so? I had to go without electricity for two days last winter. Ice did something to the lines going to my apartment. But you know, I made it okay. Didn't feel a bit traumatized."

Glowering, he looked away from her. "I guess you're trying to say that I should be grateful that you were willing to take care of me?"

Her hand felt as though it was vibrating on his shoulder and she pulled it away, hoping it would put an end to the odd sensation. "Well, you don't have to go so far as to be grateful. Just civil will be enough for me."

His head twisted back around and Nevada felt something jerk in her chest as his dark-green gaze landed on her face. "You're doing this for Victoria's sake, aren't you?" he asked, then quickly added, "No. Don't answer that. I already know that you are."

"Well, well. You not only think you're an expert on nurses, you also think you're a mind reader. You must have many talents,

Mr. Ketchum."

Ignoring her sarcasm, he said, "See, you're not even bothering to deny it."

Nevada smiled at him. "Why should I bother? You seem to know the answer already."

He heaved out a heavy breath. "Well, I guess that part of it doesn't matter. I just don't like feeling beholden to anybody."

Nevada's expression turned serious. "Look, Linc, I'm here because I chose to be here. I'm a nurse and when it all boils down, I can't turn away from someone who needs my help. No matter who they're related to. Now if you don't mind, I need to unload my things from the car."

She stepped around him and jerked the car door open. Linc watched with helpless frustration as she pulled out several pieces of luggage and piled them on the ground. Normally, he would never allow a female to lift anything heavier than a plate of food in his presence. But as it was he was so incapacitated he couldn't even pick up her handbag.

"If you need help with that I can call someone up from the main house," he finally offered.

She glanced his way. "Thank you. But they're not a problem for me to carry."

He watched her shove one of the bags beneath her armpit and pick up two more with her hands. How the hell was he going to deal with this woman for two weeks or more, he wondered. She'd already managed to make him feel like a helpless idiot.

Moreover, she was just too damn sexy.

"I—uh—I'd help if I could," he felt compelled to say.

She started moving toward the house and he fell in beside her.

"I know that," she said. "Don't apologize for your condition. You can't help it. Just try to get well as quickly as you can."

The two of them crossed the rough ground of the yard and climbed onto the porch. There Nevada turned to look at the view. The house was facing south and some distance over on the next mountain ridge she could spot the top of the main ranch house. Between here and there was nothing but forested mountains.

"This is beautiful," she said with quiet awe.

Linc looked at her, faintly surprised by the sincerity in her voice. "Yeah, but give yourself a few days and you'll be screaming to see town again."

She flashed him a glance. "How could you predict that? You don't even know me."

"Women can't stand the isolation."

Obviously Linc Ketchum wasn't just down on being incapacitated, he was also down on women for some reason that Nevada would very much like to know.

"Excuse me, but Victoria lived her whole life on this ranch until she went to med school and married Jess."

He waved away her words. "Victoria is different. She's a ranch girl, a cowgirl."

Nevada wanted to ask him what he thought she was, but she didn't bother. Now wasn't the time to try to dig into him. If she

was going to be able to make it through the next two or three weeks, she needed to keep peace with the man.

"Well, don't worry about me getting cabin fever. I'm sure you'll keep me entertained," she said, then turning to the door, she opened it and stepped inside.

Linc quickly followed her into the small foyer and then into the long living room until she stopped abruptly and stared all around her.

"Oh! This is lovely. This looks almost like the big ranch house. Only smaller."

The room had off-white walls and a high ceiling crossed with heavy oak beams stained a deep brown. The floor was covered with a shiny brown-and-beige tile and a good portion of the north wall was built of plate glass. The landscape past the window was breathtaking and framed the peaks of the distant San Juan Mountains, which, in spite of it being midsummer, still hung on to their caps of snow.

"You sound surprised," Linc said as he watched her drop her bags and walk slowly around the room. "What were you expecting?"

She shot him a frank glance. "Nothing like this. Victoria told me this was just a small ranch house that they leased to any of the ranch hands who had a family and were in need of housing."

"She told you right."

"Goodness! This is so—beautiful!" Continuing her walk around the room, she inspected the leather furniture, the Western

photos and paintings on the walls and the wagon wheel that dropped from the center beam in the ceiling. The wooden wheel was circled with lights that were fashioned in the shape of old-time lanterns.

The fact that she was so taken with the house both surprised and pleased Linc. He hadn't expected such a reaction from her. To look at her, she seemed like the modern-apartment type.

"I'm sure it seems dated and stuffy to you."

"Not at all," she said as she headed toward an opening that looked as though it would lead to the kitchen area.

Linc followed her into the kitchen to a pine table and benches located near another wide window. From here Nevada could look down upon the ranch. From this angle, looking left, she could see a meadow filled with black Angus cattle and the sparkling ribbon that was the Animas River.

"Where do you live?" Linc wanted to know.

She glanced away from the window and over to him. He was standing only a couple of feet away from her and she picked up the faint masculine scent of his body. An inward shiver raced through her as she looked at him, and she hoped the reaction wasn't showing on her face. The last thing she needed was for this man to think she was attracted to him.

Which she wasn't. She couldn't be. He was a patient. "In Aztec. In an apartment." She grinned wryly. "My kitchen view is of an alleyway. The only good thing about it is that I get to see an assortment of stray cats hunting through the garbage cans."

“Hmmph. I’ll bet you’re the kind of woman who pours feed out for them.”

She laughed guiltily. “Well, I am soft-hearted when it comes to animals,” she admitted. “And I’d never let one go hungry for any reason.”

“You like animals?” he asked.

Once again he sounded surprised and Nevada wondered where he’d formed his opinions about women.

“Very much. In fact when I first started college I had plans to become a veterinarian. But then a close friend of mine became seriously ill and I decided that maybe I was meant to help people get well.”

“Did you help your friend?”

Shaking her head, Nevada turned away from him. He didn’t need to see any sort of sadness or woe on her face. Not now. Linc Ketchum needed to see bright skies ahead and she was determined to show them to him. “No. She died. And that only reinforced my resolve to stay in medicine.” Turning she smiled at him. “But that’s in the past. And right now I think I’d better go carry in the rest of my things and get settled in.”

She turned and walked out of the kitchen and Linc found himself wanting to follow her, talk to her, if for no other reason than to hear her voice. Which didn’t make one iota of sense to him.

Linc didn’t talk to women just for the sake of making conversation. Sure there were women who came to the T Bar K

looking to buy a horse or colt or have a mare bred by one of the ranch's champion stallions. And Linc didn't have any problems dealing with them. But as far as his personal life went, he'd always made it a policy to steer clear of women.

It wasn't that he disliked the opposite sex. To Linc, women were pretty much like the horses he tended. Most of them were very beautiful, but they were also high-strung and unpredictable. If he ever let his guard down around one, even the sweet-natured ones, he was taking a big risk of getting hurt, and hurt badly. So he stayed alert and safe around his horses and the women he happened to come in contact with.

The front door opened and closed for a second time and he realized Nevada had already returned to the house. He quickly left the kitchen and walked out to the living room to see her hefting three more bags.

"If you'll show me where I'll be sleeping, I'll get these things out of the way," she told him.

As he walked across the long room to join her, he thought about having her sleep in the small upstairs bedroom. The farther he could put her away from him, the better he'd feel. And the room did have a pretty view and a nice set of oak bedroom furniture. But it would be mean of him to make her climb the stairs with all those things. So he motioned for her to follow him down a long wide hall that was covered with more tile.

Halfway down the corridor, he motioned to their left. "There's two rooms here that are pretty much the same. Take your pick.

It doesn't matter to me," he lied.

Her gaze went from one door to the other, then across the hall to where two more doors were located. "Where is your room?" she asked.

Frowning, he asked, "Is that really important?"

She made a face of disbelief. "You are my patient. I need to be as close as possible. It will make things easier for me and you both."

"I don't need help getting to bed."

Dropping the bags, she turned a disgusted look on him. "Really? You can unbutton your jeans and shirt? You can pull back the covers?"

Dear Lord, he was going crazy. Of course he couldn't do those things. But how in hell could he let this woman undress him? To have her pretty brown hands touching him in such a way would be downright decadent.

"Well, I can manage somehow. There's no need—"

"Look, Linc Ketchum, this is no time to be bashful or modest. I'm a nurse. I know all about men's anatomies. Helping you out of your jeans won't turn me three shades of red or make me want to attack you with lust in my eyes."

She was so cute and sassy and reasonable that it made him furious. But he tried his best to bite it all back and behave as the cool cowboy he'd always believed himself to be.

"Miss Ortiz, you've just relieved all my worries," he said curtly.

She studied his face, the faint grin on her lips coming and going along with the dimples in her cheeks. Linc forced himself to stay put even though her nearness was affecting him the way the scent of a wild deer excites a docile horse.

"I'm glad we got all that straight," she said. "It would be awkward if we rubbed each other the wrong way right from the start."

As far as Linc was concerned it would be awkward if they rubbed each other any way. But then he couldn't rub her even if he wanted to. Not with hands that resembled two white clubs.

Trying not to look petulant, he jerked his head toward the door behind him. "That's my room. So this one—" he motioned to the door behind her shoulder. "Would be the closest to mine."

"Okay."

She turned and opened the door and Linc felt compelled to follow her into the bedroom.

"Oh! This is lovely, too. Goodness, Victoria must have sent an army of maids up here. Everything looks so beautiful and it smells like wood polish."

She walked over and trailed her fingers over the fat carved end post of the bed. Linc was surprised that she was so impressed with the house and its furnishings. He expected that as a nurse she made a very nice salary. Victoria wanted the best in her clinic, and he knew she would be willing to pay far more than hospital wages to this woman. But apparently she wasn't used to expensive surroundings.

“Then I take it that the room is okay with you?” he asked.

She glanced around the room which had a small alcove that held a desk, chair and a graceful floor lamp.

“It’s more than okay. It’s just great,” she murmured as she ran fingers along the silky comforter on the bed. Turning to him, she smiled. “I’ve never lived anywhere this nice before. I’m not going to know how to feel,” she said, then laughing, she bounced on the edge of the mattress. “No broken springs or sags in the middle.”

“I’m sure your apartment is very nice,” he said as he stood watching her playful antics and wondering how it must feel to be that young and carefree. It had been so long, years and years, since he’d raced over the ranch yard with Ross and Seth and yelled at the top of his lungs with the pure joy of being alive and happy.

Seeing the sober look on his face took away some of the pleasure Nevada was feeling and the smile faded from her face. “It is nice for what I can afford. It takes a lot of money for rent and everything else that goes with making a living. Especially when you’re trying to save, too.”

Linc suddenly felt a little ashamed of himself. He’d never had to worry about money. His father had left him a fairly large inheritance and since then he’d earned plenty by managing the horse-breeding program for the ranch. In fact, money was something Linc rarely thought about. His home was on the ranch and he didn’t want for many material things. But apparently Nevada didn’t have it so easy.

"What are you saving for?"

She appeared surprised that he asked the question and frankly, he'd surprised himself. It was none of his business what she did with herself or her money. But something seemed to have happened to his common sense since Nevada Ortiz stepped out of her dusty little car.

She shrugged. "Oh, well, you know, the normal things. Mainly the future. For a family."

His brows slowly lifted as he watched her wavy black hair slide over one pert little breast. "You have someone you're planning to make a family with?"

Laughing softly, she rose from the mattress. "Goodness no! I have plenty of boyfriends, but none of them are husband material."

His frown was tinged with disgust. "If they're not husband material, then what are they?"

"Well, I'm sure you have girlfriends. It's the same thing. They're just companions, guys that I enjoy doing things with."

Linc wanted to kick himself for suddenly feeling so disillusioned. Just what was he expecting from this woman? he asked himself. She was young and beautiful. No doubt she had plenty of men friends she enjoyed herself with. To her they were probably nothing more than toys.

Ignoring the part about the girlfriends, he said, "If that's the case, then what do you call husband material?"

Pursing her lips with displeasure she shook her head. "I'm

not really thinking about that now. I'm only twenty-five. I'm not ready to settle down. In fact, I'm not sure that I ever want to get married."

"You just said you wanted a family," he reminded her.

Her expression went stone-sober as she walked past him and picked up one of the cases she'd left in the doorway.

"I do. I just can't figure out how to have one without having a man in the house with me. Unfortunately you need one to produce children." Sighing, she placed the duffel bag upon the bed and began to pull out a stack of blue jeans. "But I keep hoping that someday I'll meet a man who will change my mind about love."

Love. Now that was a word he never spoke, didn't believe in, or want it discussed in his presence. It made him feel very squeamish.

Realizing it was long past time he left the room, Linc turned toward the door only to have her call after him.

"Where are you going?"

Without looking at her, he said, "To call down to the ranch to see if they can round you up a television from the big house. You're going to need something to keep you busy."

Her tinkling laugh filled the bedroom. "I don't need a television. I've got you to keep me busy."

Like hell, Linc thought.

Chapter Three

More than an hour passed before Nevada finished unpacking her things and arranging them just as she wanted in the big bedroom. The dresser and chest were massive, along with the walk-in closet. She could have brought every piece of clothing and toiletries she owned and they wouldn't have filled half the available space.

Nevada couldn't believe the house had been built just for the sole purpose of extra housing for ranch workers. It was too beautiful and, in spite of its old age, had been kept in perfect condition. Someone had taken great pains to copy the big ranch house and rich details could be seen in the dark oak casings around the windows and doors, the expensive tiling on the floor, not to mention the nice furnishings.

The first moment she'd walked into the house, she'd felt some sort of strange connection, a feeling that made her wonder if she was experiencing what it felt like to go home. Which had been an odd reaction for Nevada. Since she'd been a very young child, she hadn't ever felt like she had a home. At least, not like regular folks.

Even though she'd grown up in a house with two parents, it had been far from a normal home. Her mother and father had quarreled incessantly until their arguments had become out-and-out fights that included throwing fists and objects. Nevada

had often hidden in the closet praying for the noise to stop and praying, too, that she would someday be able to escape the house that seemed to be filled with nothing but hate.

No. Nevada wasn't exactly sure what a real home would feel like, but she was certain this old house might hold the answers.

Giving one last look over her shoulder, she left the room. Her medical bag was still in the car and she wanted to get Linc's bandages changed before it was time for dinner. Something she was to cook, she supposed, since the closest restaurants or delis were at least twenty miles away. Nevada wasn't exactly brilliant in the kitchen, but if necessary she could put something edible on the table.

Humming to herself, she stepped onto the porch and immediately spotted Linc sitting a few steps away in a wooden rocker. His felt hat was pulled down over his eyes, but the moment he heard her footsteps and the creaking of the screen door closing behind her, he pushed it back on his forehead and cocked an eye at her.

"What are you doing?"

The question seemed comical to her and she laughed softly. "Does it matter?"

He scooted up from his slumped position in the chair. "No. Since you're going to be here for a while, I can't start worrying whether you can take care of yourself or not."

She walked over to him. "What do you mean, take care of myself?"

He shrugged one thick shoulder. “I just meant you surely have enough sense not to do silly things. Like walk out in the woods by yourself.”

Nevada frowned. “Why shouldn’t I walk in the woods?”

He let out a long sigh. “Bears for one thing. Another, you’d turn around once and be lost. The mountains and the basins begin to all look the same. You’d probably be to the Colorado border before you realized you were going north.”

Nevada had to admit she wasn’t necessarily good with directions and as for bears, one of those hairy creatures was the last thing she wanted to meet up with.

Smiling at him, she said, “You’re probably right about that. I have to take a map with me just to find my way around Santa Fe. But that doesn’t mean I can’t get out in the woods. You’ll be along to help me find the way.”

Linc’s mouth fell open. “Bullsh—”

He stopped abruptly before he released the last of the curse word and Nevada only smiled wider.

“What’s the matter now? You don’t like to take walks?” she asked.

Linc rolled his eyes. “I use my legs for a purpose. I walk all over the ranch yard. I don’t walk for a woman’s entertainment.”

“But you’re not working down at the ranch yard now,” she sweetly pointed out. “And if it’s safe to ask, just what do you do to entertain a woman? Can you sing or play the guitar?”

He scowled. “No and no.”

“Oh,” she said with feigned disappointment. “I thought all cowboys could do those two things.”

“Only on television,” he grumbled.

“Well, I’m sure you have some talents. And I’m bound to discover what they are before I leave here.”

“Don’t bet on that.”

Laughing softly, Nevada stepped off the porch and walked to her car. Once she had the medical bag out of the trunk, she carried it to the porch and motioned for Linc to follow her inside.

“What do you have there?” he asked suspiciously without making a move to do her bidding.

“My medical bag. And there’s not a thing in here that will hurt you. So get to your feet and come along.”

“I don’t need any medicine. I’ve already taken it for today,” he said as he managed to rise to his feet without the help of his arms or hands.

The man must have rock-hard abs, Nevada thought, to raise himself up with no help from his upper limbs. But she didn’t need to be thinking about Linc Ketchum’s abs or the whipcord strength of his body. She was here to nurse, not daydream.

“I’m not going to give you any medicine,” she assured him, then shot him a little smile that was a bit wicked. “I have other things I need to do to you.”

Eying her through narrowed lashes, Linc stopped in his tracks. “Whoa now,” he said firmly. “If you think I’m going to blindly follow your orders, you’re crazy, woman.”

Nevada lifted her gaze to the ceiling of the porch and hummed a bit of a song about suspicious minds.

Linc cursed under his breath. “I’m not suspicious. I just want to know what’s going on. It’s my body after all,” he practically barked.

Compassion filled Nevada’s soft heart and with a smile she walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Linc. I was only teasing you a little. It’s a proven fact that patients get well much faster if they laugh. You really need to loosen up and let loose with a few chuckles.”

“I don’t have anything to laugh about,” he grumbled.

Nevada tugged on his arm and urged him toward the door. “Of course you do.You can laugh at me. I won’t mind at all. Besides, I have a nice surprise for you.”

As Linc allowed her to lead him into the house and then the kitchen, he didn’t question her further. He was too busy noticing how it felt to have her arm wrapped around his, her hip and thigh softly brushing against him.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d touched a woman. Apparently he’d allowed too much time to pass since he’d gone on the prowl for a little female companionship. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be having such a strong reaction to Nevada Ortiz. Sexual starvation could be the only reason he was suddenly noticing the scent of her hair and wondering what she looked like beneath her clothes.

The two of them entered the kitchen and she pointed to the

table. “Okay, sit down there while I get everything ready.”

Since he was in such a vulnerable condition, it was obvious he was going to have to trust this woman completely. And if Victoria thought so highly of her, she must be a good nurse, Linc told himself. But she didn’t look or act like any nurse he’d ever known. And he didn’t feel like any normal patient would feel whenever she touched him. But that was something he was going to have to get over. And fast.

With that resolution in his head, he eased down on the long bench and rested his bandaged arms and hands on the table. Like a colorful bird flitting happily from one limb to the next, she moved around the kitchen gathering scissors, towels, tape and a bowl of yellow goop that looked like the sulfur poultices he sometimes used on his horses’ cuts and wounds.

“Before I headed out here today,” she said as she sat down next to him, “I went by Dr. Olstead’s office to pick up my orders for you. He says it’s time for you to see that you still have fingers.”

Linc’s expression was a bit confused. “I’ve seen my fingers since they were burned. I know that they’re still there.”

“Yes. But this is going to last for more than just a few minutes,” she said, then smiled broadly at his perplexed expression. “Just wait and see.”

She picked up a pair of the small scissors that she’d pulled from the medical bag and began to cut through the bandage on his right arm. The white gauze was thickly wrapped and the instrument chewed slowly as Nevada guided it through the

material.

While she carefully worked over his arm, Linc studied the shiny crown of her black hair and the dark crescent of long lashes shadowing her cheeks. There wasn't anything about the woman that wasn't fresh and young and lovely. Everything about her glowed like a star plucked from a night sky.

"You like being a nurse?" he asked in hopes that a little conversation would take his mind to more normal things.

"Very much," she answered. "I like helping people."

"Is your mother a nurse?"

His question must have surprised her because she looked up from her task and frowned.

"Heavens no. Mom would run off screaming if she had to change a bandage or a bedpan."

"What does she do?"

Nevada's gaze slipped back to the job of cutting through the bandage and then she shrugged. "She works as a barmaid. In a tavern over in Bloomfield."

"Oh."

He didn't think there had been any note of disgust in his one word, but she must have thought so. She looked up again and this time her lips were set in a grim line.

"Yeah. Oh. Her job is not something I approve of. But she seems to like it. She says the tips are good." With a heavy sigh, she went back to cutting the last of the gauze away from his arm. "Believe me, Linc, my mother wasn't always—well, let's just say

in the past years she's allowed her standards to fall."

Linc didn't know why he'd even questioned her about her mother. He'd thought that maybe she'd gotten her personality from the woman. But apparently mother and daughter weren't on the same wavelength.

"Why is that?"

She kept her gaze focused on her job. "She became—well, I guess you could call it disillusioned with a lot of things. She just gave up on ever having any sort of decent life. You know, a husband, a home, a good job."

"Your parents are divorced?"

She nodded. "For a long time now. Dad liked women. I couldn't count all the affairs he had before the two of them finally ended their marriage."

Linc started to ask her if that was why she hadn't yet married. But he stopped himself. He didn't talk about marriage with any woman. Even in a passing way. And he certainly didn't want this glamour girl to think he had any sort of matrimonial thoughts in his mind.

"That's too bad," was all he could say.

"Yes. Very bad," she said in a resigned voice. "Because of my dad, my mother stopped taking care of herself. She began having affairs just to spite him. And after that everything went downhill."

She looked up at him and he could see shame and sadness in her brown eyes. "I don't really know why I told you all that. It's

not something I go around discussing with anyone."

"I never repeat things told to me in confidence," he said, just in case she was worrying he would tell others about her family.

Shaking her head, she said, "I wasn't worried that you would. It's just not something I talk about."

Linc understood what she meant. Darla, his own mother, was never discussed by him or his cousins. Years ago, her name was brought up from time to time, but now there didn't seem any point to it. None of them really knew if the woman was still alive. And apparently she didn't care enough to let them know.

He noticed Nevada was beginning to peel away the layers of gauze away from his arm and he was relieved by the distraction. He didn't want to think about mothers or parents or ruined marriages. All of which were very unpleasant subjects to Linc.

"Good lord, that arm looks like the skin of a baby mouse," Linc exclaimed as she pulled the gauze completely away from his arm and then carefully rested his elbow on a clean towel.

"That's good. It's pink. It means it's alive and getting good blood flow."

It should be getting plenty of blood flow, Linc thought grimly. Each time the woman got near him he could feel his heart thump into overdrive. A silly reaction and one he'd certainly never experienced before.

He glanced down at his arm and tried not to feel deflated. The new skin was so thin it was practically transparent. All the hair was gone and in places he could see blue blood veins running just

below the surface.

"I guess it is healing," he had to concede.

"It is and very nicely, too. That's the way we want to keep things going." With her hand on his upper arm, she carefully twisted his arm back and forth so that she could inspect the top and underneath. "Boy, you really did a number on this one. Is the other arm like this one?" she asked.

"Pretty much."

She glanced up at him and he could feel the touch of her brown eyes as it slipped all over his face.

"Victoria tells me that you were a hero. She said if it hadn't been for you several of the horses would have burned to death."

He grimaced. "Victoria is biased. She thinks of herself as my sister. She'd never say anything bad about me."

Nevada shot him a faint smile. "Do you think of yourself as her brother?"

Linc had never had such a question put to him and for a moment it took him aback. All these years he'd thought of himself as the cousin, the one standing just on the outside. And it wasn't because Ross or Seth or Victoria had tried to make him feel that way. In reality it had been quite the opposite. Tucker's children had treated him as though he'd been one of Tucker's offspring, too. But there was no escaping facts. He wasn't one of them. And yet he loved them just as much or more than if they had truly been his siblings.

"Yeah. I guess I do," he murmured.

"I'm glad. Because she thinks you're just about the next best thing to pajamas."

Glancing away from her, he said, "I didn't do anything special. Anyone would have gone in after those horses. I just happened to be the first one at the barn."

That wasn't the way Nevada had heard it. Victoria had told her that several of the ranch hands had been at the barn and they'd tried to hold Linc and keep him from running back into the burning building. They had not been able to stop him, and by the time Linc had emerged from the flames, the entire group had begun to think he was dead.

"Well, I'm sure your horses are happy about it. But I'll bet they miss you."

"Dr. Olstead won't let me go near them. Bacteria, he reasons," Linc muttered. "Hell, they're cleaner than I am. The stalled ones get a bath every day."

Nevada smiled with understanding. "Dr. Olstead is right. You don't want to risk getting any sort of infection. It's not that he thinks the horses are unclean, but there's other things around a barn that might harbor bacteria. Like flies and things like that."

"Yeah. I understand. But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"No. You don't have to like it," she agreed.

Reaching for the scissors, she began to cut away the bandages on his hands. This task took longer, but Linc didn't mind. In spite of all his protests it was more than nice to have this lovely woman touching him so gently, touching him as though she really cared

about his health and well being.

Don't start thinking along those lines, Linc. Just because a woman acts sweet and gentle on the outside doesn't mean she's all goodness on the inside.

His hands had been burned even worse than his arms and Nevada clicked her tongue with misgivings as she unwrapped each finger. "God, this must have been painful. Does any of it still hurt you?" she asked. "If it does, just let me know. I have painkillers in my bag."

"No. None of it hurts. In fact, it mostly doesn't have any feeling at all," he told her. "If I touched your arm, I doubt I'd feel it." At least not in his fingertips, Linc thought. But the rest of his body darn sure would.

She nodded soberly. "The nerve endings in your skin were burned."

"Will it always be that way?"

Her brows pulled together as she gave her head a little shake. "I'm not sure about that, Linc. I think that problem will get better in time, but I can't make you any promises. I'm just an RN not a doctor."

She proceeded to clean his hand and arm and then slather it with the yellow goo. Once she had every spot of his limb covered with the stuff, she began to wind clean gauze around his arm.

"I guess there'll be plenty of scars once the skin heals," he mused aloud. "What about the hair on my forearms? Will it ever come back?"

She looked up at him and gently smiled. “I’m not totally certain about that either. I’d say probably. At least part of it. But who cares whether you have hair on your forearms? You can always wear long sleeves. They look more masculine to me, anyway.”

He drew in a deep breath and pushed it out. “You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

She shot him an annoyed look, then laughed softly. “Look, Linc, I’m going to be honest with you. A few scars or a lack of hair is nothing to what you could have had. It’s a miracle you’re alive. So you’d better be thankful.”

He glowered at her. “You think I need your preaching to tell me that?”

“You haven’t heard preaching from me—yet,” she warned.

“Hmmph,” he snorted. “For someone so little you’re sure full of sass.”

“That’s to make up for my size,” she reasoned pleasantly.

As far as Linc was concerned, he didn’t see a thing wrong with her size. Everything was put together perfectly. Too perfectly for his peace of mind.

“Can I wiggle my fingers?” he asked as he forced himself to focus on anything but her.

She raised up from ministering to his arm. “Sure. Wiggle all you want.”

Linc attempted to flex his bare fingers, which still looked like sticks of watermelon to him. “All the time I was in the hospital,

I kept thinking how good it would feel to bend my fingers. But it—well," he grimaced as he tried to close them into his fist. "It doesn't feel all that good. They're stiff."

"That will soon change," she promised. "I'm going to bandage each finger lightly so you can move them around and maybe use them just a little. But I mean very little."

He looked at her with surprise. "You mean I don't have to go around with my hands plastered against boards?"

She gave him a happy smile. "Nope. Now, isn't that good news? And aren't you sorry about all this whining and griping?"

The expression that stole over his face was mostly sheepish, but the upward curve of the corner of his lips told her he was definitely pleased.

"Maybe I have been a little cranky," he admitted.

She couldn't help but laugh. "Is that normally your nature?"

He frowned. "Why do you ask that?"

Nevada made a palms up gesture. "Because I don't know you, Linc Ketchum. I don't know if you're usually grouchy or cheerful or sweet or mean or what."

"You're not here to analyze my personality," he reasoned. "And you don't need to know any of those things just to doctor my hands."

Nevada was going to be doing more than doctoring his hands, she wanted to point out, but she didn't say that to him. She could see that it was disturbing to this man to have her here in the house. So far she'd tried to keep everything as light and playful

as she could. And she hoped she could keep their time together on that same track. It wouldn't do for both of them to get serious.

"Well, I guess I'll learn for myself," she said as she picked up a roll of gauze and started one end of it around his thumb. "Do you think you can tell me what you like to eat? Or is that a secret, too?"

"You don't need to worry yourself about that either," he told her. "Marina will be bringing up supper from the big house each evening."

This was news to Nevada. Victoria really hadn't had time yesterday to discuss some of the details about her stay here or her duties to Linc. She'd expected to be preparing some sort of meals for him and herself.

"That's nice. But I hope she'll allow me to do breakfast and lunch."

He studied her through drooped lids and for the first time in Nevada's life she felt her whole body react to a man in a purely sexual way. Heat filled her cheeks and she felt as though her whole body was soon going to be glowing like a firefly.

"What does a nurse know about cooking?"

Nevada drew in a bracing breath and told herself not to look at him. She couldn't look at him if she expected to get her senses back under control.

"Probably about as much as a cowboy does," she muttered.

He caught her off guard by releasing a low chuckle. "You might be surprised at what I know how to do in the kitchen."

Nevada couldn't keep her gaze from latching on to him and the minute it did her stomach did a nervous jump. Was he talking about cooking, she wondered, or something altogether different?

"Really. Then maybe you could teach me a few things," she ventured.

The amusement on his face disappeared like a cloud slipping past the sun and his gaze traveled from her face to her bosom and back again. "I'm sure you've already learned everything there is to know."

Chapter Four

Something about Linc's words struck Nevada hard and deep. And for the next few minutes she didn't say anything as she finished bandaging his fingers then went to work on his left arm to repeat the same process.

She really didn't know why his remark had bothered her so. Maybe it was the note of disgust she'd picked up in his voice or maybe it was the lewd way he'd looked at her. Either way, it didn't matter, she told herself. Linc Ketchum wouldn't be the first person to think she was a promiscuous young woman. Some of her so-called friends had also accused her of sleeping with a long list of boyfriends. But in reality nothing could be further from the truth. Nevada was a virgin. And so far she hadn't met one man who would make her want to change that fact.

Even so, she wasn't going to explain any of this to Linc Ketchum. Her sexual habits were none of his business. Pure and simple.

Later that evening, after she'd finished dressing Linc's burns, Nevada went outside to explore the rugged landscape of the yard. She was at the back of the house enjoying the sight of the far-distant San Juans when she heard the sound of an approaching vehicle.

Carefully picking her way through the rocks and clumps of blooming sage, she skirted the end of the building to see Marina

climbing out of an old red pickup truck.

“Marina! Hello!” she called to the housekeeper.

The large Mexican lady with a heavy braid pinned to the back of her head, turned in the direction of Nevada’s voice and smiled broadly when she spotted her.

Nevada waved and hurried over to the woman. Without uttering a word of welcome, she hugged Marina tightly. Nevada didn’t get to see her old friend that often. Yet somehow from the very first time Victoria had introduced Nevada to the housekeeper, Marina had felt like the mother that Nevada had always wanted.

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