

Chapter One

She might have taken him for just another cowboy, the way he stood on the side of the highway next to a ten-year-old Silverado that had seen better days. She pulled the Wrangler over. Aramis leaped from the back to the front seat and eyed the stranger. He was tall and wore his Stetson low. He'd taken his shirt off. A trail of dark hair shot down his torso like the shaft of a downward-pointing arrow. His faded jeans rode low and snug. Shadowed by the Rockies, he looked right at home. As if the only space large enough to hold him—the only place he could ever truly be at ease—was outdoors.

That's why she might have taken him for just another cowboy, except that his eyes seemed uncommonly discerning, as if he already knew all there was to know about her. It was unnerving.

“Need some help?”

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I could use a ride.”

She sighed. The last thing she needed right now was a cowboy down on his luck. “How about if I call someone for you?”

He shrugged. “Don't know anyone.”

“Well, where are you staying?”

“Haven't figured that out yet.” He grinned and crouched low, calling to her dog. “Come here, boy.”

Aramis shot out of the car.

“Sit.” Aramis sat. “That’s right.” Aramis’s tail thumped wildly. “Good dog!” He scratched the dog’s ears. “He’s well-trained. Siberian Husky?”

She got out of the car and walked toward the cowboy. “Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

“Aramis. So, what brings you to this part of the country?”

“I figured someone would give me a job. I’m good with horses. You know, roping, ranching.”

“You do any rodeoing? Rodeo comes back our way in a month. I might be able to help you hook a job.”

He pushed his Stetson back, revealing dark wavy hair that hadn’t seen a barber in some time. She could see his eyes more clearly now and felt like he was drinking her in.

“Yeah, a bit.”

“If you don’t have a cell phone, I can call the garage for you.”

“No phone. A little cash. No friends. You could be my first.” He grinned again and gave Aramis a playful pat on the rump. “Your dog seems to like me. You know what they say. You can’t fool a dog.” He waited.

She hesitated.

“Seems a little unneighborly to leave me here. Wouldn’t it be just as easy to take me into town as to call someone? Sign back there said it was seven miles. Too far to walk in this heat.”

He stepped out of the shadow. His eyes were cerulean, like the Colorado sky, his skin deeply tanned. He was, by any definition, magnificent. In this part of the country where Utes, Hispanics and Caucasians had settled more than two-hundred years ago he could have easily

been taken for a local. She dug the toe of her boot into the side of the road. He looked like a cowboy, but there was something unusually intense about his manner underneath the casual surface.

She peered into the cloudless sky, then over at Aramis. No one was likely to travel this stretch of the highway any time soon, and it was unseasonably hot for early June. What could happen in seven miles?

She walked back to her car and patted the seat. "Aramis, come!" To the cowboy she said, "Hop in."

He hauled a saddle and shirt out of his truck and dropped them into the back. As he got in, his knees smashed up against the glove compartment. He felt around, found the lever and adjusted the seat.

She cut back out onto the two-lane highway. "What's your name?"

"Rafe. Yours?"

"Liberty Starr, but you can call me Libby."

"Liberty?"

"What can I say? My parents were hippies, heavily into the peace movement. They had no idea what they were saddling me with." She shot a look over at him and smiled.

Rafe frowned. "Liberty Starr. Seems like I've heard that name before." He shrugged. "Can't place it. You famous or something?"

She giggled. She couldn't help it. The idea of her being famous seemed ludicrous to her.

She was about to ask him where he was from when he asked, "Live around here? Stone Hill, maybe?"

"Yes. I'm a townie."

“Live in town all your life? Because you look like you’ve seen a lot of the outdoors.” He grinned. It might have been just a cowboy-friendly grin. She wasn’t sure.

Libby hesitated. Sometimes she told people right off just to get the inevitable out of the way. Other times she didn’t. “How familiar are you with this area of the country?”

“Some.”

“Ever heard of Haley’s Ranch?”

“Sure. The nudist colony that got so much press a couple of years ago. Something about misappropriation of funds, I think.”

She glanced at him. For all the world he looked like he belonged in a saddle yet the term “misappropriation of funds” rolled off his tongue as if he said it every day.

“So, you know about Haley’s Ranch?”

He shrugged. “I heard a little about it.”

“Well, I grew up there. Left it when my mom died a few years ago.” She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Sometimes men took it in stride. Sometimes they just got stupid. She wondered how Rafe would react. *Let’s see what you’re made of, cowboy.*

When he didn’t say anything she prodded, “Rafe what?”

“Say, wait a minute. You’re the one. You’re the one whose trust fund was misappro—stolen.”

“Yes, along with two other women.”

“Big stuff. Those guys are going to see a lot of prison time.”

She nodded. They drove around the last curve and rolled into Stone Hill.

He pointed. “That the garage? You can just drop me there.”

She parked in front of Hamilton's Fuel & Tune, and turned to him. She guessed he was probably a year or two older than she was.

"I don't know you—don't know why I'm going to offer this except that my dog seems to like you. See that inn at the edge of town?" She pointed. "I own it. The Carter House. It's the only hotel around. I also board horses. Got a couple of stables. We get a fair amount of rodeo tourists here July through September. It's quiet now because the rodeo's in Grey's Canyon for the next few weeks. I can offer you a free lunch if you're hungry and a place to stay for the night. You might get a line on a job hanging out in the dining room. Or, you could work for me. I could use the help."

Rafe stiffened.

"Don't worry. I'm not offering a handout."

She saw him visibly relax.

"I know what it's like to be short on funds. And friends. And I could seriously use the help. My stable boss and his family went chasing after the rodeo to Grey's Canyon, and my handyman is recovering from a back injury, so I'm short-handed."

She watched as the cowboy turned in his seat. His eyes settled on hers, and she immediately felt drenched by their blue intensity. After a moment he let them roam to her throat, her shoulders, then dipped further down. She almost never wore a bra. Old habits were hard to break, and she was acutely aware that she poked through her white cotton tank with enthusiasm. His gaze lingered then dipped across her belly and over her thighs. She didn't know which affected her more, the way she felt when he looked at her dead on, or the way she felt when his eyes toured her body.

“Liberty Starr. People call you that?”

Libby smiled. “Most people call me Libby.”

“Libby.” He rolled her name over his tongue and grinned. “Well, I’m not most people, and from the looks of things, neither are you.” His grin widened. “Liberty, Libby, Lib, Bee...” He shook his head. “None of those work. How about I just use your initials—*L.S.*” He frowned. “Nope—sounds like *Ellis*, a guy’s name.” His gaze swept across her like the summer wind just before a storm. “Nothing even remotely male about you.” He snapped his fingers. “I know. I’ll drop the *S* and call you *Elle*. Thanks for the ride, Elle.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek, catching the side of her mouth as he pulled away. He smelled like a cowboy all right. One who was as down on his luck as he was charming. It was the last thing she needed.

Libby set the bucket of oats in front of her favorite horse, a black mustang stallion. “Hey there, Marengo.” She laced her fingers into the horse’s mane and ran the back of her hand against the side of his face. Libby had inherited Marengo the way she tended to inherit most of her animals. She just stumbled upon them when they most needed her. She’d come across Marengo as a colt only a few weeks old while he was being attacked by a cougar. She drove the cougar off, brought the colt home and nursed him back to health. She tried several times to release him back into the herd, but he always followed her home.

She owned three other horses: Betty Grable, a painted palomino with dainty legs; a chestnut mare with an attitude named Jezebel who liked to drive Marengo

wild; and her first horse, the tall and almost ghostly White Cloud, who was now nineteen. Libby preferred to care for her horses herself, and kept them in a private stable, separate from the boarded horses. Usually she had about a dozen horses boarding with her. At the moment, however, with the rodeo in Grey's Canyon, she only had six in her care. It was just as well since she was currently without help.

She drew up her hair into a ponytail and began to muck out the stalls. It was hot, dirty work. After several minutes she was dripping wet. Her cotton tank slung low as the sweat collected. She peeled it off and moved on to the next stall. When she'd finished, she stripped out of her shorts and briefs and turned on the faucet. She took a long pull then held the hose high letting the cool water wash her clean. Outside behind the barn, she stretched out on a hay bale for a quick nap.

This was the main reason Libby kept her horses in a separate barn—for privacy. As a naturist, she was entirely comfortable with her body and needed to be unrestrained by the superficial layers of clothing that kept the sun, wind and rain from her skin. On summer days when the heat was high, she often took care of her horses in the buff and stretched out in the sun behind the barn afterward.

Libby awoke to the low nickering of Marengo begging for their afternoon ride. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, then stumbled back into the barn.

"I'm coming, boy. Where do you want to ride today?" She patted his neck, took hold of his mane, and vaulted onto his back. She pressed her knees into him, and then leaned forward to stroke the side of his neck. This animal was the best ride she'd ever had. He moved like the wind.

Stone Hill was a valley town surrounded by the Colorado Rockies. Beyond Libby's stables was some of the most beautifully wild, rugged country that Colorado had to offer. Endless sky. Tall grasses as far as the eye could see. But the terrain was deceptive. The ground broke suddenly and dropped into a gorge. Beyond it stood the majestic Rockies. It was treacherous for anyone unfamiliar with the area. Libby had posted signs warning bikers, pedestrians and horseback riders not to wander off the trails, to help keep them from toppling into a creek bed or meeting with some other unfortunate accident.

She could feel Marengo itching to run. She clicked her tongue. "Go ahead. You know the way."

They headed west to the falls. She clicked her tongue again. The horse leaped, sure-footed and powerful. She leaned into Marengo's mane and urged him even faster.

"Go ahead. As fast as you want."

They were like two entwined spirits. She let him run until he stopped of his own accord, trotting into the open area behind a spray of falls that fell from an overhang above. He picked his way across the hardened clay and shale at the lake's edge, carefully wading into the shallow until horse and rider were under the falling water.

It spilled over them both. She stretched her arms laughing at the feel of it, then patted Marengo's hind quarters to urge him a little farther into the falls. When he was where she wanted him, she released her hair and let it fall loose. She shifted her body until she was lying on her back, her head against Marengo's mane. The water poured in rivulets down her torso. She spread her legs and let the water kiss her. It was cool, exciting. She lay stretched against Marengo's back enjoying the liquid aphrodisiac. When she was fully aroused, she moved her

hand down to the soft folds of her body, languidly pushing her fingers in a circular motion until her body began to soften and spiral.

She thought about that cowboy Rafe. The way he'd looked her over. The way his eyes rested on her every curve. He'd looked a long time. And when he kissed her, she had felt the rough of his beard. Was he just another rodeo chaser? Would he show up at her door for food and whatever else he could get? She thought about his eyes, and the swell between his legs. With the heat from Marengo's back, the cool of the water, the memory of Rafe, and the intensity of her fingers, it wasn't long before the spirals broke into soft explosions. She shrieked and then heard the canyon echo it back. Marengo nickered softly and whooshed, as if he understood that sometimes a girl just had to release some tension.

Marengo walked most of the way back. The slow pace allowed her hair to dry into soft waves that splayed around her shoulders and down her back. Marengo picked up speed as they neared the stables. The sun was fading. She would brush him down and then get some dinner for herself. Marengo walked into his stall and turned to look at her. She fed him a sweet apple, brushed him down, gathered up her clothes and headed toward the Carter House.

The walk between her stable and her suite of rooms at the back of the inn had been gated off and was private, intended for her use only. Something Rafe apparently didn't know because he was standing in her path, pulling on a cigarette. He hadn't seen her yet.

She didn't mind the fact that she was nude. If she'd learned anything, it was that others got a whole lot more shook-up about nudity than she did. But she would have

preferred to have her clothes on; while she loved being naked in nature, being naked around people she didn't know really wasn't her thing. She was not an exhibitionist. Besides, it was important to maintain a little mystery with men.

The sun dropped behind the Rockies just as he turned in her direction. Suddenly, it was night and he was nothing but a shadow. He tossed his cigarette and walked toward her. She couldn't tell just when he realized she was naked.

"They told me you'd gone out for a ride. Figured I'd wait for you." She could hear heat in his voice.

"You come by for a place to stay?"

He nodded. "And I thought I could help you with your horses, for a while anyway."

"You have any trouble working for a woman?"

"No ma'am." He grinned.

"You said you've done roping and rodeoing. Have you done any stable work? Or am I going to have to teach you everything? Because I don't have time to teach some greenhorn."

"I know my way around."

She hesitated. "Okay, as long as you understand how things work. I'll make sure Emma knows to give you a room and put you on the payroll. Have you had dinner?"

He stepped a little closer. "I was waiting for you."

She shivered. She couldn't help it. Cool as she was about her own nudity, she felt exposed and overheated and more than a little wild standing in front of him. His shirt was open, hat tipped low, body stoked. Her own body was still relatively hot-wired. He took another step. His boots crushed pokeweed and gravel. His head dipped. His arm circled around her waist. God, but he was strong.

His lips brushed hers then closed in, coaxing her until she opened her mouth and let him take it the way she knew he would. His tongue searched for hers. When he found it, they entered into an exquisite dance. He had a great mouth. Wet and deep, firm. He tasted of burnt tobacco and smelled of leather.

He let her go and stepped back. She felt the loss of him. He tipped his hat. “That was just to show you that I know my way around—understand how things work.” He grinned. “Besides, you were so beautiful in the waterfall, you kind of got me going.”

Her body stiffened. “What—you saw...you were watching? But that was *private*.”

“If that was private, then you need to find a place where anyone who happens by can’t see.” He was convincingly unconcerned.

“What were you doing out there? How did you get there? Were you following me?”

“Now slow down. Don’t want you jumping to the wrong conclusion. I brought you a horse to board. Figured if I was going to work here, I should do my part and bring you some business. They told me you were out riding. Thought I’d see if I could find you, and enjoy a ride. I did, on both counts.” He grinned again. Amused. Unflappable.

“You should have let me know you were there.”

His eyes landed squarely on hers and she felt her body stir. “I did that too. But between the water and all the noise you were making, you didn’t hear me.”

“You should have tried harder.”

“That would’ve meant coming closer. I didn’t think you’d want that.”

“You could have turned and ridden away as soon as you saw what I—that it was a private moment.”

“How do you know that I didn’t?” He patted his belly. “I’m starving. Think we can go get that dinner, now?”

She’d never run into anyone like him before. If she wasn’t careful, his grin would absolutely undo her. Playful. Outrageous. Confident. She tossed her head. “I’ll see you in the dining room.”

She left him to watch her retreating backside as she moved purposefully toward her rooms. It would be a challenge, but somehow she would maintain a little mystery with this one, even though he’d already seen her naked, watched her pleasure herself, and kissed her until she nearly purred like a cat.

One might think it was a little too late for mystery—but she’d find a way.

Rafe acknowledged to himself that until today, he’d never met a woman he might possibly like wearing clothes as much as he liked her naked. He reminded himself that he shouldn’t have been surprised to find that Liberty Starr was not your typical small-town, cowgirl type. But everything he’d learned about her before coming to Stone Hill hadn’t quite prepared him for the woman he’d met today.

She must have called Emma from her room because by the time he walked up to the desk, Emma was already expecting him.

“You planning to be here for a while?” Her voice was gruff.

“Looks that way.” He grinned, but the matronly Emma wasn’t an easy conquest.

She frowned. “How long’s ‘a while’?”

Rafe looked directly into her eyes. “I’ll be straight with you, ma’am. I don’t know. But while I’m here, I intend to make myself useful.”

“*Useful*, he says. Well, I’m giving you one of the smaller rooms. It could use a few repairs. You any good with a hammer?”

“Sure.”

Emma narrowed her eyes. “Well, that’s one way you might think about making yourself useful. You go on into the dining room and don’t wait for Libby. Kitchen’s about to close. She’ll be along when she’s ready.”

Rafe sat down in a booth at the far end of the restaurant where he could watch people coming and going. The room was packed with people and more formal than he’d expected. There were deep red leather booths and white tablecloths. A tea light in a gently curved hurricane lamp flickered at every table. The vaulted ceilings, skylights, natural wood and a candlelit veranda created a welcoming but cozy atmosphere. Earlier as he’d moved about the town he’d seen a number of eating establishments—taverns, cafés, chain restaurants; it was no small feat that Libby’s inn was so clearly the local favorite. Yet he’d expected this, so he couldn’t have said why he was surprised.

Liberty Starr. She didn’t look anything like her photo, yet still he’d known her. He was uneasy when he saw her pull off the highway to offer help. He’d hoped to roll into town quietly without anyone, and especially not Libby, taking much notice. But one look at that long blonde hair of hers made him change his mind. She had the kind of beauty that came on slow—struck a guy over and over the longer he looked. He hadn’t been entirely

honest with her. He did have a cell phone and had been just about to call for help when she showed up.

He scowled. This was not going to be as simple as he'd hoped—already it was messy. They'd warned him to leave everything behind that might give him away, including his horse. But instead of leaving the mare behind, he'd had her stabled close by in Grey's Canyon because this was rodeo country. Depending on how things went down, he might need a horse. He might even need to compete in the rodeo and, if so, he wanted a horse he could depend on—one that would respond to his every command without hesitation.

But Libby had caught him by surprise. He liked the way she'd stopped to see if he needed help, the way she'd spoken openly about herself. He liked the way she couldn't leave him stranded on that lonely stretch of highway, even though she wasn't sure she trusted him. He liked her so much, he'd decided to move his horse from Grey's Canyon to her stables, and take her up on her job offer—even though he didn't need either—even though it would be a distraction from his intended purpose.

His scowl deepened. This was not the time to pull a caveman act, kissing her like that. Yet he knew why he'd done it. Part of him wanted to show her who she was dealing with. Prove to her just how much he knew his way around. But mostly he'd done it because he couldn't stand there another minute looking at her all golden and flushed from her ride, without kissing her.

He closed his eyes to better see her naked again and grinned, remembering the way she walked away from him like a high-stepping filly. He used to think there was nothing like the backside of a woman—the rest was just frosting. But what Libby had was a lot more than frosting.

She was full where a woman ought to be and taut where a man wants her to be. Yes, this could get very messy.

He was so distracted by the memory of her he nearly missed her approach, until Emma called after her. He opened his eyes in time to catch a glimpse of tanned legs and a shapely backside before she disappeared around the corner. When she returned, he watched her walk, a light sway to her hips. Her hair was still a little damp, presumably from a shower, and bent in soft waves. She wore a white dress that clung like a second skin and barely restrained what lay underneath. The dress buttoned up the front—the top three buttons were left undone, revealing glimpses of what lay beneath. Thin spaghetti straps slid down off her shoulders as Libby moved, giving the impression that the dress was just moments away from sliding off her strikingly toned body.

She looked genuinely concerned. “Oh, no. You waited for me. I didn’t mean for you to wait. The kitchen has closed. And Ruby’s gone home. About the best I can do now is to throw a couple of steaks on the grill, or warm up what’s left of today’s special.”

Emma hollered from the other room. “No special left.”

Rafe thought the woman must have the hearing range of a bat.

“Then I guess it’s steak. You eat red meat?”

He grinned. “I eat just about any kind of meat.” Although he hadn’t intended to, it sounded suggestive, even to him. He tried again. “Red meat is fine, although I prefer white meat.” Even more suggestive. “What I mean is, I’m pretty good with a grill. How about letting me handle the meat.”

He should just shut up right now. He watched her kick off her shoes, and followed her into the kitchen.

She pointed. "Steaks are in there. Grill is out there. Charcoal should already be in it. Lighter fluid on the second shelf under the grill. I'll get a salad started. You eat salad?"

He nodded. Nodding was safe. There could be nothing suggestive about a nod, at least in this context.

"Looks like there are a couple of baked potatoes left. They ought to be easy to heat up." She glanced at him and blushed. Now she was doing it. One of her straps slipped. His body responded to her like a schoolboy's with little or no control. He couldn't remember the last time he was this powerfully attracted to a woman.

Desperately, he tried thinking of the Pledge of Allegiance to distract himself. When that didn't work, he tried to recite the alphabet backwards. From there he moved to accounting principles, and finally in desperation he tried to remember Latin noun declensions and verb conjugations, but there was no stopping his lower region from reaching out to greet the woman. He spied a chef's apron and put it on for camouflage. Outside, the patio was lit with gaily colored lights.

Rafe started the coals then went back inside. Libby straightened and backed out of the refrigerator, her hands full.

"Need any help?"

A bottle of dressing slipped out of her grasp. He caught it just before it smashed against the hard tiled floor. He grinned. She couldn't know that this was probably about as helpful as he was going to get. On more than one occasion he'd been booted out of the kitchen and branded a nuisance.

It wasn't that he wasn't willing. After all, he was quite good with his hands. He could build just about anything, even without plans. He'd spent many a cold night out on the range whittling, and had a handmade chess set to show for it. He was good with horses and could rope just about anything, including women. The trick with women was as simple as this: It was all about making a woman feel great. And not just *making* her feel great. It was about *enjoying* making her feel great. His nimble hands and sexual conquests aside, it was always a mystery to him that each time he tried to help out in the kitchen, he was suddenly all thumbs.

"Sure. Why don't you slice some avocado for the salad? Knives are here, avocado there." She pointed to Ruby's impressive rack of knives.

Rafe eyed the avocado. It looked innocent enough, but he knew better. He'd tried to work his way into an avocado more than once. He peeked over at her. She was slicing cucumbers, tomatoes, red onion, a few sweet peppers, paying no attention whatsoever to him. He reached for a knife. It felt awkward in his hand. Too big. Unwieldy. He hacked into the outer layer of the avocado, determined to do his best, when he felt her brush up against his side and place her hands over his. Her tanned arms were warm. He could feel the softest part of her body against his arm, and caught an eyeful as she leaned in. Her hands were strong for a woman. The skin, soft.

"Let me show you." She worked his hands as if they were her own. He was amazed at the way she was able to get his fingers to cooperate, and found himself once again more than a little aroused.

"I think we could use a second one. It's in the fridge. Want to give it a try?" She hadn't taken her hands away.

Her eyes drifted up toward his. He could see that she was amused. It shook his confidence a little. He could feel the way his feet shuffled as he walked to the fridge to get another avocado, unwilling to be the clumsy loser guy. He brightened. Maybe she would help him with this avocado, too. She didn't, but he actually managed a pretty good job the second time around.

"Nice." She smiled. Her eyes rolled over his. They were green with brown flecks. He would have pulled her to him and forgotten all about food, except that he was so hungry he could feel himself losing strength. He'd pulled his truck out onto the highway about 4:00 that morning. Hadn't taken the time for breakfast. The last time he ate was lunch the previous day.

He watched her unwrap the butcher paper from the steaks and set them on a plate. His eyes shifted between her face and her body. She caught him looking. She opened a cabinet and pulled down two glasses and a bottle of wine, then handed him the plate with the steaks.

"Coals should be about ready." Her eyes gave nothing away.

He took the steaks and did his best to saunter out of the kitchen. She followed him, carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses. He tossed the steaks on the grill. They hissed when they hit the heat. The sound settled him. He was in control again—of himself, and the situation. If there was one thing he knew, it was how to grill a great steak.

She popped the cork. "Wine?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"A malbec. One of my favorites with steak."

He nodded. "Soft tannins, lively acidity, unassuming—a perfect balance for steak."

“You know wine?” She looked pleased.

He shrugged. “I worked a couple of summers at a vineyard in the Sonoma Valley. I know a little.”

The wine gurgled into the glasses as she poured. She took a taste and smiled. “I think you’ll like this.” She handed him a glass, then turned on her heel and went back inside. He was instantly disappointed that she wasn’t staying to keep him company.

But she was back in a moment with warm garlic bread. “I’m starving. I need a little something with the wine.” She tore off a piece. His hands were busy rubbing cracked pepper into the steak. She offered him a bite. He took it. The bread was toasted to perfection, the middle still soft with a mixture of butter and garlic. Some of it drizzled down the side of his chin. She caught it with her finger and popped it into his mouth. She took a bite herself, and then offered him another before sitting down at one of the wrought iron tables. Rafe was glad he was still wearing the apron and wondered if she was intentionally flirting with him or just doing what came naturally to her.

“So, you brought me a horse to board?”

He nodded, wiped his hands and took a taste of the wine. It was good. He would bring a bottle next time. He had one in mind he was sure she’d like.

“Whose horse is it?”

“Belongs to a friend of mine.”

“A friend?”

He nodded but offered nothing more. “How do you like your steak?”

“Medium rare.”

He grinned. “Glad to hear it.” He hopped up and flipped the steaks.

She brought out plates, the salad, potatoes, silverware and napkins just as he was taking the steaks off the grill. He poured more wine for both of them. His knees grazed hers when he sat. He hadn't meant to and pulled his chair back.

He lifted his glass in a toast. "Thanks for helping me out today."

She nodded. They drank. He watched her set her wine glass down. Watched her push the side of her hair back behind her shoulder. Watched the way the straps of her dress fell low on her arms, and groaned silently as he made up his mind. He would make no more overtures. This was the best course of action going forward for three reasons. First, she was pretty sure of herself. She knew she didn't have any trouble attracting men—which meant she was confident enough to let him know if she was interested. Second, she was going to be his boss. Sort of. For a while. At least until he figured out what to do next. Third, a romantic interlude with Liberty Starr, no matter how enticing it would be, was not on his agenda.

He shook his head. Too bad he'd kissed her. To taste a woman like her and then set her aside was not going to be easy. And he'd given her the impression he was interested. He wasn't even twelve hours into this thing, and he'd already racked up a number of mistakes. Sloppy.

"Steak is good." She smiled at him.

He slammed back to the present and had to work to keep from inhaling his food. Everything tasted great. Fresh. New. The lights danced in the breeze and tossed colored shadows against her face. The sound of mandolin music drifted softly toward them.

When he asked about it, she said, "One of our guests."

“It’s nice.”

“Yes.”

He poured them more wine. “I owe you an apology.” She put her fork down and looked at him.

“When I found out you’d gone riding, I had no idea that I was barging into something private. When a horse moves as fast as yours did, it’s easy to pick up the trail. I just thought we might ride together. I didn’t realize—what I mean is—” He broke off.

“Is that your idea of an apology?”

He tried again. “By the time I tracked you down, you were under the waterfall. I only saw the back of your horse. I thought you’d gotten down and were on foot somewhere. I called out but you didn’t answer. It wasn’t until I got a little closer that I realized—and when I did, I pulled back. I am sorry.”

He was being truthful. He did pull back. And then he watched from a distance, unable to tear his eyes away. Seeing her on her horse like that was about the most sensual thing he could ever remember seeing.

“So, once you understood that my ride was private, why were you waiting for me?”

Rafe felt himself color. “It never occurred to me that you wouldn’t dress before leaving the stable. And then we were already in conversation when I realized you were—”

“Naked.”

“Yes.”

“And the kiss?”

Although he was trained not to, he let his eyes roam her face, down her throat, across her shoulders until they rested on her breasts. When he’d taken enough of her in, he closed his eyes. “There just wasn’t any way not to.”

She shivered.

“Cold?”

She smiled. “More tired than cold.” She got up and walked over to a wicker chest tucked into the corner of the patio, where she pulled out a blue blanket with white wolves and chestnut-colored horses running side-by-side. “Want one?”

He shook his head.

She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. The weight of it pushed her dress lower. She opened a second bottle and filled their glasses.

“We okay, then?”

She smiled. “I like my privacy. Maybe it’s because I spent all those years with absolutely no privacy at all.”

“You didn’t like the colony?”

“I didn’t know anything different. Actually, I’m grateful that I grew up the way I did. But some people equate nudism with exhibitionism. I am neither a nudist nor an exhibitionist.”

“And yet you were riding your horse naked.”

She smiled again. It warmed her eyes. “I’m a naturist.” She took a drink of her wine. “Thank you for apologizing. I’m over it. So, what are you really doing here, Rafe?”

Careful there, fella. Watch yourself. “I do a bit of rodeoing.”

“Really? Then I’m surprised you didn’t know the rodeo is in Grey’s Canyon during the month of June.”

“I did. I just hadn’t gotten there yet when you found me broken down on the road.”

She seemed to accept that. He shifted things back to her. “How does a girl who’s all alone end up with all of this?”

“What makes you think I’m all alone?”

Be very, very careful. Better slow down on the wine.

“That was just my way of trying to find out.” He grinned.

She shrugged. “I was in my second year of veterinary medicine when my mother got too sick to take care of herself. I left school to come home and care for her.”

“There wasn’t anyone at the colony to care for her?”

“She’d left the colony by then.”

“I see. So she was living here?”

“No.” She glanced at him. Her eyes were troubled. “It’s complicated. My father died when I was thirteen. He was a seer. People came to him to learn about their future.”

“And was he able to help them?”

“Some. Mostly, my dad was a drunk. Nicest guy you’d ever meet, but he just couldn’t hold it together. I think he loved my mother very much, but he was haunted. He came and went until one day he was gone for good. They were so different. She was from Long Island—Caucasian. He was from Big Water—part Hispanic and part Caucasian. She met him one night in a bar, her first year of college. She was underage. He was the bouncer and let her in.”

“She went to the University of Colorado?”

Libby nodded. “Wanted to become an aeronautics engineer. But she met my dad. Got pregnant with me. Dropped out of college, and that’s when they moved to Haley’s Ranch.”

“How did your mother’s family react?”

“At first they cut her off. Later they relented.”

“They cut her off because he was of mixed race? Because of the nudist colony, or for some other reason?”

“All of the above. And they’d already selected someone for her.”

“You ever meet them?”

“No. They welcomed her back into their lives, but they never approved of my dad. She never forgave them for it, so we never visited them.”

“That’s rough.” Rafe topped off Libby’s glass.

“After Mom died, I was at a loss. I couldn’t face going back to vet school. I’d lost momentum. I was a spinning wheel with nowhere to go.”

“Because the colony had misappropriated your trust fund?”

“Misappropriated—that’s a legal term. You use it easily.”

Rafe checked himself. “I’m just remembering the headlines.”

“Yes. They’d stolen my mother’s money. I didn’t really have a home. We’d stayed with a woman here in town, a good friend of my mom’s, and I just couldn’t figure out what to do with myself.”

“So you bought the inn. But how did you manage that, with all of the legal problems between you and the colony?”

She looked at him hard.

Slow down. You’ve got to slow down.

Libby shrugged. “That’s another story entirely. I bet Ruby saved me a piece of her chocolate torte. I’ll split it with you.”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. She headed for the kitchen and returned with two plates. He reached around and pulled the blanket back up over her shoulders. She smiled. They ate in silence.

After a few moments he said, “This is a showplace. Hard to believe it was this nice when you took it over. I’d guess you had to put a lot of work into it, yes?”

He knew he'd made her uncomfortable because all she said was, "Yes. Something like that, anyway. What about you?"

He finished the last bite and pushed his plate away. "I never knew my dad. My mother was Ute and Hispanic. She died when I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry. What of?"

"Heart trouble. The worst kind."

"I don't understand." The blanket slid off Libby's shoulder, pulling at her dress. She didn't seem to notice.

"She died of a heart attack. When I was growing up, my mother used to tell me that she had a bad heart—that she'd loved the wrong man and now her heart was broken. She said that one day she would die of that broken heart. And one day, she did." He stopped abruptly, before he said too much.

Libby leaned forward and placed her hand on his shoulder. The blanket fell away. "I'm sorry, Rafe." She brought his hand palm up to her lips, kissed it, and placed it against the bare skin over her heart. He could feel the soft curve of her body.

In his lifetime, he'd never met a truly irresistible woman, until today.