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STANDING GROUND

By

Mary Louise McNabb

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

STANDING GROUND

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In the heart of Montana Rocky Mountains lies the Sterling quarter horse ranch. Rachel Sterling, a woman of twenty-three years, was born and reared there and is now faced with persuading her widowed mother, Zelda, to grant her control of the territory that by birthright has been given her. Rachel works hard throughout the summer to prove herself worthy of inheritance. Meanwhile, Zelda taking residency in Boston, schemes to secure her daughter's future via a husband. When a wealthy bachelor from California, Jesse Ryan, comes calling Rachel is lured into a romance that proves to be nothing other than the fulfillment of her match-maker's fantasy. Zelda, apt at the art, further provides her daughter with alternatives. One of these requires Rachel to relinquish authority on the ranch to a new owner, Drew MacLeod. Since Drew has gained Rachel's friendship as a hired ranch hand her feelings of love conflict with outrage when she learns of his collusion with her mother. She accuses the cowboy of trying to buy a way into her heart and refuses to surrender herself to a love tainted by what appears to be a lust for power.

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank my family for their continued support which helped me to complete **STANDING GROUND**. Also, I thank Dr. Shelia McGuire and Professor Doug Lawder for their part in my development as a writer.

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Rachel Sterling guided a paintbrush across the weathered plank of wood. There were many chores to accomplish within a few weeks, and giving the front porch of the lodge a fresh coat of paint was but a minor matter. Attending to the birthing of five foals came first on her ladder of concerns. However anxious she was to have that done with Rachel could not force nature to shorten its ways. So, she and Bill and Drew took to painting while awaiting the births of five new foals. It was the largest number of horses she had ever expected to welcome to the ranch in one year. When born the foals would add a tenth to the population of Sterling quarter horses. She took pride in the prognosis.

Little talk passed between the three during the afternoon. No one of them fancied painting. Running a brush back and forth over an old wooden surface was not a cowboy's duty nor fancy. But, Rachel had insisted the hands help paint the porch since weather was unpredictable in the spring and today afforded pleasant weather.

Silence broke from across the yard. The beat of horse hooves from a trot into a gallop reached Rachel's ear. She glanced up, puzzled at first then horrified at the sight of a herd of horses breaking loose from the pasture. "Bill—" beyond that shrill utterance she fell speechless and stood gaping at the sight. The horses disappeared around a bend in the dirt road cutting through Sterling territory.

"Come on—" Her cousin grabbed a hand and pulled her along with him hurrying across the lawn and into the stables. Within moments

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hackamores were yanked from a shelf in the tack room and thrown onto three geldings. The riders mounted and darted out into the wide open air. Along the dirt road hoof tracks of the runaway herd had printed like footsteps in wet cement making it easy for the riders to follow. Off the road and onto a forest trail the three pursued some forty horses. They galloped at a steady, unyielding pace. A touch of warmth in the wind hitting her face prompted Rachel to smile in spite of the circumstance. She was enjoying the midday ride that had broken the rhythm of her paintbrush. Out of the forest and into a highland meadow the riders came upon the herd scattered and grazing at leisure.

"I'll take the rear." Drew veered left to position himself at the opposite end of the meadow while Bill went right to cover that side of the clearing. Rachel had her eye fixed on Drew when commotion came from the rear and set-off a chain reaction among the grazing horses. She faltered. The thundering of hooves beat into the ground louder, faster, closer, coming directly toward her. She frantically swung her horse's neck around. Lucky reared on hind legs, let out a bellow, and turned awkwardly. The first of the runaways galloped past. The race was on and Rachel riding bareback was caught in the middle of a wild herd of quarter horses.

With a deliberate swift kick in the barrel, she sent Lucky into a full run. Her knees clung to the working muscles of the bay horse. Lucky's strength burst forth in a gallant effort allowing Rachel to gain enough ground on the front runner to enter the forest ahead of the rest. She led the way along the riding trail while the herd of horses followed blindly. At the end of the trail Rachel pulled Lucky off to the roadside and allowed the runaways to race on homeward. Bill, caught in

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the middle of the stampede, continued riding with the herd. Drew, merrily bouncing in stride with the horse beneath him, brought up the rear. "What a show," the cowboy said, lagging behind to wait for Rachel to catch her breath.

"A show!" She tried to steady a tremble.

"Aye, you're an excellent horseman." His smile was reassuring yet his words teased.

"Horsewoman—" Rachel kept to herself the fright of seeing forty strong, bold horses galloping toward her in the meadow moments ago. "How do you suppose they got free from the pasture?" she asked calming herself.

"There're a couple of weak boards in the fence I've been meaning to fix," he reminded her.

"Bill and I can finish painting the porch," Rachel conceded.

"Aye." Drew cast an authoritative glance in her direction then trotted on down the road.

A nudge of her knee sent Lucky ambling along the dirt road for home while Rachel gazed in wonder at the surrounding forest. These days, early in May, brought the first signs of spring to the Montana Rocky Mountains where she had lived a full twenty-three years and never grown tired of the sight. Beneath the canopy of barren poplars a thin layer of snow covered the ground. The afternoon sun shone on blades of green grass emerging from puddles of water. The sight warmed her heart with wild imaginings of the coming summer, imaginings that filled her thoughts on the way back to the stables.

Rachel alighted and led Lucky into the building. She removed the hackamore and put it back on a shelf in the tack room and reached for a

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grooming brush off a hook in the wall and went to brush through the horse's matted mane. When finished she supplied Lucky with a bucket of oats in its stall and started back to the porch that needed painting. On the way back across the front lawn of the lodge the choke of an engine rounding the bend in the road alerted her to a jeep approaching. Taken aback by the sudden intrusion of privacy, Rachel stood staring at the vehicle as it came to a rolling stop in the middle of the road. The driver jumped out and came to extend a hand in greeting to her.

"Hello—I'm Jesse Ryan—" He was a tall man clothed in a finely tailored shirt and pants. His crown of coal black hair waved freely above the ears. His eyes a piercing blue gazed steadily at her.

"Are you lost, Mr. Ryan?" she asked shying away from a handshake.

"Ah," he mused. "A woman with intuition...I find that very becoming."

"Do you?" Rachel ignored the temptation to lead him further into the realm of fascination. "Where is it you are headed?" She looked at him questioningly and awaited a reply.

"Actually," the passenger of the jeep approached them on the lawn. "We're looking for a place to stay the night." He nodded to her clipped glance that acknowledged his presence. "Hi—my name's Jake Ebb."

"The lodge is closed," Rachel informed them both. "Spring is an off-season," she added abruptly and sought to leave their company.

"Just a minute," Jesse Ryan started after her in earnest. "Is there a gas station in the vicinity?"

Rachel half-turned around to find him on her heels. "What city are you from, Mr. Ryan?" For a moment their glances intertwined in the discovery of each other. Then a pair of long blond lashes dropped and

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"I spend a fair amount of time in Los Angeles, however I was reared in the country and still make my home there among some of California's finest vineyards," Jesse Ryan informed her.

"Oh?" Rachel murmured dryly.

"Yes, perhaps you're familiar with our wines?"

"No," she said, uninterested in carrying on such a discussion. Rachel resumed walking at a brisk pace across the lawn. The stranger responded by adjusting his stride. "I told you we're not open for business."

"I'm fully aware of the fact," he clipped. "Would it be too much to ask if you have any gas? The jeep is empty."

Rachel stopped to consider the alternative to assisting him. Without a share of the ranch supply of gas the two men would be unable to leave the premises. "I can give you about five gallons," she told him.

"I'll take it," Jesse replied biddingly.

They made an about-face turn toward the garage that housed the ranch vehicles and equipment. It was a fair distance between buildings that comprised the Sterling ranch. The lodge, a stately white structure, was nestled in a grove of tall alpine fir trees on the edge of a thick forest across the vast mountain sides. A spacious lawn spread around three sides of the lodge. To the far right of the lawn lay the hay meadows and barley fields used to cultivate winter feed for the horses. To the left of the lodge a melt water stream flowed down through the pasture and into the valley where the corral and stables sat. Beyond the stables was located the garage, next to it the hands'

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bunk houses. The dirt road emerging from around the bend traversed the valley floor and ended at the garage. Rachel pulled the garage door open. "Wait here," she told the driver of the jeep and went into the building to fetch a gas can. Moments later she reappeared and handed the heavy can to him. "That should get you to a pump."

"Thank you." Jesse lifted the weight from her hands.

"You're welcome," she murmured instantly taken by his appealing smile.

They started walking more comfortably back toward the jeep along the dirt road. "That's an impressive structure," he mentioned of the lodge in the distance.

Rachel looked and was delighted to see that a fresh coat of paint served the building well. "It was built by my great great grandparents over a century ago. Fortunately the repairs we've had to make on it have only been routine maintenance. I guess that says something for old fashioned architecture."

"Hmm, but that doesn't tell me whether or not you are happy living here." Jesse Ryan casually strolling at her side, was not listening to a word of her speech rehearsed for tourists.

Rachel threw him a sidelong glance. How dare he probe her innermost thoughts. And how surprised she was to find herself answering to his charm. "I enjoy it very much. Interesting guests visit six months of the year and in the meantime...I have the forest and horses to keep me company."

"A pretty woman like you needs more than a forest and horses to keep her company," he voiced his opinion on the matter.

Rachel did not take to his telling her what she needed and stopped

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to faced him with a question. "Mr. Ryan, just what brings you to Montana?"

"My partner Jake Ebb and I are here to exploit the natural resources on the Simmon Pass. We recently purchased that piece of land, not far from here I believe? Miss—"

"Rachel Sterling," she replied. "And I would be cautious who I tell that to about exploiting the land in these parts," she gave him fair warning. Jesse Ryan simply cocked an eyebrow. "Mr. Ryan, perhaps you're not familiar enough with the area to know that we value the wilderness—"

"Trees grow to be cut down," he scoffed lightly and started again toward the jeep.

"Well," she said pausing beside the vehicle. For a moment her eyes took in the sprightly smile, smoothly contoured jaw, wind burnt lips and blushingly met his straight forward gaze. "You'll see what I mean soon enough."

"I'm looking forward to it." Jesse tilted the can to pour the gas into an empty tank. "My luck is running strong these days," he declared assuredly. Rachel stepped back silently waiting for the can as the afternoon sun sank behind a ridged skyline. "Where do you suggest we find accommodations for the night?" Jesse asked upon returning the empty can to her hand. The mere caress released a boom of sensation throughout her body.

She hesitated. There were very few lodgings within a fifty mile radius and it went against ranch policy to take on boarders in the off-season. Even during the summer and winter months when it was available to lodgers, advance reservations were required in order to get

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a room at the Sterling lodge. The policy served to guard against waywards. But these two men had recently purchased Simmon Pass and giving them rooms for a night would not be the same as taking in total strangers, she reasoned. "I supposed I could open the lodge as a neighborly gesture, you understand."

"Much obliged," Jesse Ryan replied with that broad smile of his.

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Rachel showed her guests into a huge square room supported at four corners by thirty foot wooden pillars. The lobby seemed so desolate in the off-season with the several circles of furniture dividing the polished wooden floor left empty. The large stone hearth remained cold and the sixteen bedroom doors on the second floor balcony closed. "Whose's the hunter?" Jesse inquired of the moosehead hung over the entranceway.

"Grandpapa got it. It's been hanging there as long as I can recall."

The men took to milling about the room dressed further with a map of the Sterling territory marking the hiking and riding trail and fishing holes in the surrounding area. "Should we sign the registrar?" Jesse paused to page through the book left open on the desk top.

"If you like," Rachel said and went to show Jake Ebb the spacious diningroom off to the right of the lobby. "We serve three hardy meals a day to an average of twenty-five people during the season."

"You mean to say our luck's run out?" He poked his head inside the room.

"I'm afraid it has," she added and decidedly bypassed mention of her own living quarters sectioned off from the rest of the lodge by a panel door which lay hidden under the main stairwell. It gave access to the private flat in the south-west corner of the building.

"This old place reminds me of pioneer days," Jake told her as they strolled back to the registration desk located near the double door

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"Other guests claim to have seen their ghosts," Rachel said. "I suppose it's part of the appeal—"

"What sort of appeal is that?" Jesse Ryan wanted in on their conversation.

"Lewis and Clark," Jake mentioned. "They must have stayed here at one time."

"We don't have the records to prove that," Rachel told the men and ascended the stairs to the second floor balcony to open two of the rooms for the overnight guests. "The central bath facilities are at the end of the hall...let me get some bedding," she excused herself from their company and disappeared down the hall into a walk-in linen closet. The shelves were stacked with sheets and woolen blankets. She gathered a lot of each into her arms and returned to the men waiting. "Here you go." She divided the bedding evenly and handed half to Jake Ebb.

"No maid service?" He stood holding the bedding like a child, ignorant but willing to make an effort.

"No, no maid service." Rachel turned to give the remainder of the bundle to Jesse Ryan and came face to face with him in the shadows of an overhead light. A quiver trembled along her spine. He reached out to her. She released the bedding into his arms and watched him walk into the bedroom and unfold the fitted sheet. Towels, they need towels. She snapped out of a trance and went to get some towels from the linen closet. Rachel returned moments later to find Jesse tugging on the squared corner of bedding. "You've had training," she commented while draping two towels over a wooden rack above the marble basin in the corner of the room.

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"My father always insisted that I do my share of domestic duties. He taught me that when a bed is made properly one should be able to bounce a quarter in its middle." Jesse reached into his pant pocket and found a coin. Rachel watched amusedly as he tested for success.

"What have we here?" Jake appeared in the doorway of the bedroom.

"Trying to impress the lady with an old navy trick." Jesse sheepishly retrieved a coin from the middle of the bed where it had landed. "Now—" he straightened his stance to its fullest. "Shall we have dinner?" His inquisitive blue eyes looked down at Rachel.

"Uh," she stalled recalling the pot roast wrapped in tin foil and sitting on the second shelf of the refrigerator in the flat. Along side the leftover meat was some lettuce, and butter, nothing to comprise a meal, per se. "There's a dancehall about ten miles north of here that has a short order menu," she finally told him.

"To the dancehall it is." Jesse's hand cupped her elbow.

"I'll need to change my clothes." Rachel withdrew her arm from his touch. "Make yourselves comfortable in the lobby. I'll meet you in about fifteen minutes?"

"Fair enough." Jake Ebb stepped aside to allow her access to the doorway.

Her feet danced on air down the stairs. Rachel had met many men at the lodge over the years but none had captured her interest the way Jesse Ryan did tonight. She stole a glance back at the man leaning against the wooden railing above and ducked under the stairwell to reel aside the panel door.

A short corridor opened into a livingroom and kitchen area. The ceilings of the rooms were tall and floors spacious. Rachel had known

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no other home than within these walls. She had been born upstairs in the master bedroom where she now shed stiff working clothes and hurried into the shower. Dripping wet she stepped onto a worn carpet and draped a towel around her nakedness. She went to search the closet for something to wear and found there a long sleeved corduroy dress. Rachel donned the dress while posing in front of a full length mirror. She fitted the garment smoothly to a blossomed figure. Her long blond hair as fine as silk fell to the middle of her back. A pair of high-heeled leather boots concealed her shapely calves. She took a knitted shawl from a dresser drawer and carried it downstairs. Her footsteps began to slow. The nearer to the wooden panel she drew the more her heart beat raced. It went against her principles to allow strangers to stay on the night much less throwing all care to the wind as she was. But—strangers or not they had given her little reason not to accept the dinner invitation. Rachel went ahead and pushed the panel aside.

The lobby of the lodge was deserted. Rachel called upstairs to the men. No answer came. She went to check for them on the the porch and found that they were waiting in the jeep parked at the foot of the staircase. Jake climbed out of the vehicle to help her in, then climbed back onto the seat beside her. The bumpy ride along a dirt road left every one keeping their thoughts to themselves. Rachel made a mental note to add chuckholes to the repair list. "Take a left," she told Jesse when they reached the two-lane highway. The jeep turned onto a paved road and sped ten miles through the Rocky Mountains. Amid the alpine forest a bright neon sign appeared on top of a log cabin. "There it is." Rachel pointed out the dancehall. Jesse steered off the pavement and brought the jeep to a halt under a lone street lamp erect

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in the forest clearing.

"Melody Rose Dancehall," Jake read the sign aloud. "Looks like we're in for a genuine hoedown." He threw a leery glance at the others.

"It will give you a chance to get acquainted with the folks," Rachel said trying to encourage him to get out and go in.

"That is why we are here," Jesse added and clasped her hand in his to steady the high-heeled boots that hit the ground as she climbed down.

The three of them strolled into the dancehall and took seats at the bar counter. Rachel caught the eye of the waitress sitting on the lap of a cowboy at a table along the wall. The young woman waved and slowly excused herself from the company of three ranchers. She strolled over to the counter, hips swinging. "Rachel—I didn't expect to see you here tonight." Her chewing gum cracked while she busily eyed the men that accompanied her friend.

"Louanna Pines, this is Jesse Ryan and Jake Ebb."

"Charmed." Louanna cast a quick glance at each of the two men.

"Rachel has been kind enough to let us stay at the lodge tonight," Jake added.

"I thought the lodge was closed until June, Rachel?" Louanna detected something amiss.

"I could hardly turn out a neighbor in need," she attempted to explain.

"Neighbor?" Louanna took it for a line. "I never seen neither of you two boys before tonight. Where're you from?"

"I'm L.A. born and bred," Jake declared. "Come to claim a piece of your paradise—"

"Rachel—where did you ever find these two?"

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"They pulled into the ranch on an empty tank, looking for a gas pump and a place to stay the night," she replied thoroughly pleased that the unexpected event had brought her to the dancehall.

"My partner and I recently purchased Simmon Pass," Jake interjected.

"Aye, paradise." Louanna put on a smile. "Welcome to Montana, boys. If you ever need anything or just want talk this is the place to come to find it."

"Right now we could use menus," Jake told her.

"Menu's on the wall," she pointed to the short list of food items painted in bold letters above the shelves of liquor behind the counter.

"I'll have your deluxe burger and a draft, please," Jake ordered.

"Make that three deluxe burgers," Jesse spoke for Rachel as well as himself.

"Three deluxes coming up." Louanna went to place the order with the cook in the kitchen. Meanwhile members of a band took the stage and began tuning their instruments. The sound of music seemed to beckon an audience. While Rachel and Jesse and Jake ate people drifted in from outside and filled the empty seats. Before long a crowd of fast stepping feet occupied the dancefloor.

"Anything else?" Louanna asked them cordially from behind the counter.

"No thank you," Jake replied

"Either of you two boys swing?" The waitress started clearing away the empty plates.

"I dance the two-step every now and then," Jake replied. "Nothing fancy, mind you."

A placid grin came to the Louanna's freckled face. "Want to?"

"I sure do—" Jake took to his feet as she abandoned the dishes and started round the end of the counter.

"Hey, wait a minute—" Jesse grabbed for his partner's arm. "I'd like to purchase a bottle of wine before you take her dancing the night away."

"Gordy will take care of it." On tip toes Louanna peeked over the top of the swinging doors to the kitchen. "Gordy—customers at the bar," she yelled to the cook then disappeared with Jake into the crowd.

Finally having obtained the purchase of a Ryan's burgandy wine Jesse turned to Rachel sitting beside him. "Allow me to introduce you to one of the finer things in life." He poured a taste of the wine into a glass and handed it to her, insisting she try it. Rachel tipped the glass to her lips and drank the fermented juice that tingled her tongue. "More?"

"How old you are, Jesse Ryan?" Rachel held back the glass.

"Old enough to know that you, Darling, don't honestly trust me." He reached for her glass a second time and poured wine to its rim.

"You haven't given me a reason not to trust you--yet—"

"It's that yet that has me worried," he informed her.

Suddenly from out of nowhere a loud voice thundered. "How's my girl?" Rachel swirled around in her seat to find Samuel Zecker claiming the empty bar stool beside her. "I'm just fine, Sam. How are you?"

The weathered face of a long time friend of the Sterling family leaned forward and said in a low voice, "I'm curious about these strangers you are keeping company this evening."

"Don't worry." Rachel, turning half way between the two men put her

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hand on Jesse's shoulder and said, "Jesse Ryan, this is Samuel Zecker who owns the ranch next to mine."

"Mr. Ryan," Sam's eyes narrowed in on the stranger.

"Sam—" Jesse stood to extend a handshake.

"From the south, Mr. Ryan?"

"California," Jesse replied. "My partner and I flew in for the weekend to get acquainted with the area."

"What business you got in these parts?" Sam wanted to know before he would be satisfied to trust Rachel to his company.

"Jake Ebb and I recently purchased Simmon Pass," Jesse replied defensively. "We have plans to expand our architectural design firm in the region."

Sam drank a shot of brandy in two gulps and laid the empty glass back on the counter. "There ain't no call for building in these parts, Mr. Ryan." The old rancher thrust his white bearded chin outward. "These parts belong to the wilderness—"

Jesse failed to flinch under scrutiny. "Does renovation of the old homesteads or solar energy catch your interest?" he asked.

"Solar," Sam scoffed at the mention of the word. "We'll see how his solar designs take to Montana winters." Grinning the old man tapped Rachel's hand and tipped his hat good-night.

There was a smirk lurking on Jesse's face that she could not quite read. "How did you ever get involved with solar architecture when your family owns a winery? Or are you a second son?"

"Young and full of question—" Jesse sat back down on the bar stool beside her. "I studied architecture in college, Darling, saw a future in solar designs. About the time Jake and I formed a partnership

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my parents died and left the vineyards in the care of my sister, Susan, and me. Susan, well, she fell for a Frenchman and insisted that I watch the Chateau while she chased this true love of hers around Europe...so, here I am caught between two very exciting business worlds and unwilling to make a choice between the two." He tensed a bit under an admiring gaze. "Shall we toast? to Montana and Rachel Sterling."

"And solar architecture," she added. Their glasses chimed against each other. Rachel's glance drifted to the clock on the mirrored wall opposite where they sat. The evening had slipped away. "Jesse—I really need to get home."

"The sun rises earlier every day and you along with it, I suppose."

"Yes and I got to be there in case the mares foal." In the excitement of the moment she had completely forgotten about ranch duty.

"I'm a bit tired myself from traveling. Do you think we can find Jake?" Rachel glanced around the barroom and located the man enjoying a newly acquired dance form in the middle of the regular Friday night crowd. She pointed him out to Jesse who went to pull his partner from the whoopie or the man would have danced all night.

The threesome took its way out the door of the Melody Rose dancehall. A light snow greeted them in the brisk air, remnants of winter falling. "Have you Northerners ever heard of May flowers?" Jake complained shivering in the cold.

"Flowers bloom in July around here," Rachel had to laugh under her breath. "If you want warmth and sunshine go back to California."

"We may have to," Jesse added and climbed into the jeep. He started the engine and they were gone from the parking lot. Snow flakes continued to accumulate on the windshield along the way of a winding

mountain road. By the time the jeep pulled to a halt at the foot of the lodge porch staircase the light snowfall had developed into a spring blizzard. Rachel, Jesse, and Jake, none of whom had dressed adequately for the change in weather, hurried up to the lobby doors.

"Drat," Rachel cursed the doors for having been locked. She was without a key. "We'll have to go around to the side door and hope no one has locked it!" Quickly, in the cold, she descended the stairs. Jesse and Jake followed her footsteps blindly around to the side of the Sterling lodge. Much to Rachel's surprise a light was shining through the curtains of the kitchen windows. Upon entering the flat, she discovered Drew MacLeod sitting at the table. "Did a mare foal?" She stood anxiously listening for the news and unconsciously blocking the doorway.

"Just needed a cup of coffee," Drew replied and motioned for her to clear the doorway.

"Oh." Rachel moved aside to let her guests in. "Jesse Ryan and Jake Ebb, this is one of our ranch hands, Drew MacLeod."

"Is it always this cold here in May?" Jake asked while rubbing his hands together in a desperate longing for warmth.

"Not used to it, aye?" Drew chuckled.

"No—not at all." Jake took to warming his hands around the coffee pot heating on the stove. "I'm from Los Angeles, myself, where sixty degree weather brings out the winter coats."

"Are you now?" Drew tipped back on the rear two legs of his chair. His glanced volleyed among Rachel and each of the two men.

"For heavens sake," Rachel blurted and threw her shawl over the back of a table chair. "Would either of you like a cup of coffee?" She

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started to take some mugs down from the cupboard.

"No, thank you, Darling. A warm bed is all I could ask for tonight," Jesse spoke up.

"Okay—" Rachel abandoned the effort to alleviate the tension between strangers. "I'll just show you to the lobby then." She avoided looking at Drew whose gaze she felt boring through her as she made a way from the kitchen. The two men went with her through the livingroom and hallway to the panel door. Rachel reeled it aside and flicked a light switch to illuminate the lobby staircase.

"Good night," Jake Ebb said in passing.

"Night," Rachel replied as Jesse paused on the threshold of the lobby. Her feet instantly froze where they stood, unwilling to move. "So, what did you think of the Melody Rose?" she asked awkwardly.

"Rustic, but charming." Jesse's finger brushed under the base of her chin, tilting her head back slightly to meet the lips that sought to explore a magnetism. His arms wrapped her in an embrace, molding her body to his.

Rachel pulled aback from the impact of his touch. "You'd best say good-night." She raised a hand to his chest.

His blue eyes studied her thoroughly. "Good-night then."

"Yes, good-night, Jesse Ryan." And the cool air ran to greet her.

"Darling, would you fetch me a refill on my coffee?" Drew asked when she went back into the kitchen. His Canadian accent was muffled by a poor attempt to imitate the visitor's southwest American drawl. Rachel

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took the cup from his outstretched hand and poured a refill. Drew caught hold of her hand when she returned the cup to the table. "You're shaking." Warily she withdrew her hand from his. "Sit down and talk to me."

"I'm tired and haven't much to say," Rachel replied. "Expect—"

"Yes, Darling, what is it?" Drew kept a straight face through it all.

"Oh, stop it." Rachel pulled a chair out from under the table and plopped her body down onto it. She was angry with him for interfering in her private affairs, for which he seemed to have a knack. "Who told you to lock the lobby doors tonight and what business do you have in here?"

"Darling, I'm just protecting my own best interest." He did not care that his mockery was feeding a burning fuse.

"Drew—" Rachel slapped a hand against the hard wooden surface. "If you hadn't come with Bill's recommendation I never would have hired you on—"

"Of course you wouldn't have and without your cousin's introduction I never would have applied for the job of looking after you." He resumed talking in his own voice, a tone more distant and formal.

"Your job title happens to read 'ranch hand' not 'escort' or whatever position you've elected yourself to," she stated flatly.

"The fact is." Drew sat up to the table and leaned across. "You need an escort to keep you out of trouble."

"I can take care of myself," Rachel insisted.

"Can you now, Miss Sterling?" He was altogether in doubt of that.

Rachel flinched. The last thing she wanted was a strained

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relationship with this member of the ranch staff who came highly qualified after growing up on his uncle's ranch near Calgary. Nonetheless, he had overstepped his bounds by allowing himself into her private flat.

"I happen to recall signing a piece of paper, vowing to enforce all ranch policies," he reminded her.

"So you did, along with every one else who has ever worked on the ranch," Rachel paid little heed to his grounds for justification.

Drew reached into his rear jeans' pocket to pull out a type written paper. He unfolded it and began to read. "No lodgers will be given lodging during off-season months of February, March, April, May, October, and November."

"Drew," Rachel yawned heartily. "I know what it says. But, it really is my own business if I chose to break a ranch policy. Mr. Ryan and Mr. Ebb are the new owners of Simmon Pass. They are not some wayward strangers—"

Drew drank down the rest of his coffee in a gulp. "I was hired to do a job and aim to carry that duty through." He strutted over to the sink and rinsed the cup clean before heading for the back door. "Thanks for the company," he said and left her with a wink.

The sound of the door closing hung in the air. Rachel, though hours late to bed, sat pondering. What did he care whether or not those two men stayed at the lodge? She had not gotten along with Drew MacLeod from the start, ever since they met at the airport in Great Falls last month. He had insisted she drive the seventy miles to get him and bring him back to the ranch. She never usually afforded him her full attention, though he often demanded it. If not for his showing

competency in all areas of duty on the ranch—the ranch, Rachel's pride and joy and her mother, Zelda's headache.

After the death of her husband, Ben Sterling, Zelda had wanted to sell the ranch to the first deserving cowboy and move back to Boston where widow and nearly grown daughter belonged. When none of the interested parties could produce the money to pay for the territory, Zelda yielded, not without reservations to her daughter's year long plea to keep the ranch and let it prosper. She then moved to Boston reluctantly leaving the ranch in the hands of her daughter, Rachel, nephew, Bill, and one of Bill's associates from the rodeo circuit, hence, Drew MacLeod.

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III

Dawn came quickly to the heart of the Montana Rocky Mountains and brought with it another day of preparation for the opening of summer season. Rachel's inner alarm clock woke her at sunrise. Sleepy-eyed she climbed into some work clothes, rinsed her face with cool water, and tied her long blond hair in a pony at the nape of the neck. From the window she saw that the snow fall had ceased after leaving at least four inches of new snow on the ground during the early morning hours. A recollection of last night and the guests staying at the lodge came to her as she took a parka from the closet and went downstairs to the kitchen. Though she was unsure of liking him altogether, Jesse Ryan had intrigued her with his genteel manner and imploring smile. After eating a hearty breakfast Rachel made a way through the snow to the stables to check on the pregnant mares. Drew, as usual, was hard at work cleaning the horse stalls and spreading fresh straw. "Morning, Rachel," he greeted while bending over a fresh bale of straw to untie the binding twine.

"Morning." She walked on past.

"Did you notice the mess on the porch?" he asked.

"The paint—" It had escaped her thoughts that the change in weather had buried a fresh coat of paint under a layer of snow.

"Aye, it is a mess," he added.

"I'll take care of it," she told him and went into the tack room to get some grooming supplies for the mares and go about morning routines.

Rachel was happy to discover that several the mares were exhibiting telltale signs that foaling was not far in the offing.

Around nine o'clock she returned to the lodge to see how her guests had slept and found the men sitting in the lobby. "Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Never slept better—" Jake declared.

"Considering—" Jesse added with innuendoes of having missed her in the night.

"What are you studying?" Rachel ignored his straight forward gaze and directed attention to the briefcase materials spread out over a large oval coffee table.

"These are our plans for the design firm," Jake said.

"Mind if I listen in?" she asked while exchanging an awkward glance with Jesse. "No, do sit," he replied. Sit she did to listen to talk of lumbering possibilities, renovations, and construction. The blueprints for a model house planned to go up on Simmon Pass particularly caught her interest. Jesse showed her a variety of layouts. Rachel offered a suggestion where it might add a distinct regional flavor. And thus the morning passed without notice except for the newly acquired knowledge of modern architecture that made her aware of a fast-paced world beyond.

"We better get out there and survey a foundation sight," Jesse told his partner while gathering into a briefcase the scattered papers.

"There's a cattlemen's shack on the Pass," Rachel commented.

"Built on flat ground?" Jake inquired eagerly.

"Well, I don't know?" she replied unaware that it would save the builders having to survey a sight.

"We may be in luck," Jesse added with an appreciative glance in her

direction. They stood in unison forming a semi-circle. "Care to join us?" He readily extended an invitation.

"No," she declined the offer though tempting. "I have a long list of things to do today—but, let me draw you a map."

"A map would be helpful." Jake supplied her with a pencil and paper. Rachel sat back down and sketched out a guide to the shack on Simmon Pass.

"There should be no trouble locating it if you follow these directions," she told them and handed the paper back.

"Thank you." Jake took it and studied the drawing.

"Yes, thank you," Jesse added and started walking across the lobby floor. His hand reached for the brass knob to turn it. Rachel felt a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. He was leaving! So soon. She followed the men out onto the porch. "Oh," he reached for his wallet and pulled out a couple twenty dollar bills and offered the money to her. "For the rooms."

"Jesse—no," she pushed it back into his hand.

"If you insist." He resigned to tucking it away in a pant pocket.

"I take it you're leaving the area," she said.

"As soon as we locate a building sight for the house," he nodded.

"We are going to drive the jeep back to the airport and then fly down to Los Angeles to order the materials."

"Good luck," Rachel added.

"Thank you, Darling." Jesse's even stride took him down the stairs to the driver's side of the jeep.

She watched idly as the men climbed into the vehicle. The engine started. Jesse climbed back out. "Where is the gas station?"

"A mile on from the Melody Rose. There is a pump out front of Chuck's grocery," she shouted down to him. He waved and climbed back into the vehicle. Its wheels began to roll along the road marking a trail in the melting snow. Clouds overhead were breaking apart to allow sunshine down. Part of Rachel wished he had not interrupted her life while a more remote part yearned for the day of his return. Her heart was filled with the uncertainty of conflicting emotion as the jeep drove out of sight around the bend in the road lined on either side with an alpine forest clothed in winter white and awakening to spring.

His leaving abruptly cast a melancholy mood upon the rest of the day. Rachel despondently set to shoveling the snow off the porch to get a look at the ruined paint that had dried unevenly overnight. It was a mess which meant getting a scraper and smoothing over the frozen coat. She was on her hands and knees, going at the task vigorously taking out all frustration when a red Nova pulled up to the lodge and parked at the foot of the porch staircase. "Rachel—" Louanna jumped out of the vehicle and ran up the stairs. "What are you doing? Where's Jake?"

"Forget it, Louanna. They both left for California this morning." Relaying the news lessened her depression though Louanna's high spirits took a plunge. Rachel sat back on the heels of her working boots and nodded in agreement.

"Without even stopping to say good-bye—wait until I see him again—" She had an aim to give him a piece of her mind. "Where do city men get their manners?"

Not having an answer for that question Rachel resorted to scraping the paint off the porch floor. Louanna took a seat at the top of the stairs and propped her chin frettingly into the palm of a hand. "I told

him my parents owned the dancehall so he knew where I lived...did they say when they were coming back?"

"All I know is that they plan to build a house on Simmon Pass,"

Rachel replied glumly.

"When?" Louanna instantly perked up.

Rachel shrugged.

"Oh—all Jake Ebb had to do was walk though the door of the Melody Rose last night and I knew it had to be love. I dreamed about him all night..."

IV

Birth of three of the five foals occurred during three consecutive nights. Drew handled the situation by calling the vet and letting Rachel get her beauty sleep. Needless to say, she took to sleeping in the hay loft of the stables in order not to miss the remaining two birthings. These happened to come, the first on a day about midafternoon and the second three days later at sunset. Rachel liked to spend mornings getting acquainted with the foals. But when people began to arrive at the lodge little time for horses was afforded her. In Zelda's absence she was obliged to learn the managing of the summer staff and hostessing of guests. Drew and the hands that had arrived to work the summer on the ranch took over the various tasks in the stable that once had been her domain. She found the change confining, to say the least. The lodge had been opened for ten days when she decided to make the half-day trail ride through the wilderness.

Humming Rachel slipped a peach-colored T-shirt over her head and tucked it into the jeans hugging her hips. Long blond hair fell to the middle of her back as she brushed its fullness and leaned forward to peer in the mirror. She dabbed on some lip gloss and stepped back to view the effect. "There--" she said contentedly and went to gather the group of riders.

She found four names on the sign-up sheet kept at the registration desk in the lobby and resolved to see if those interested were among those eating. A low murmur of voices came from the diningroom. Rachel

went in and found the four seated together at a table near the picture window that looked out on the pasture and stables. "Good morning," she greeted John and Margret, a vacationing couple from Chicago, and Karen and Cindy, sisters from Kalispell.

"We were getting acquainted for the ride," John told her.

"Do you think I'll be safe out there?" Margret confessed to having only ridden twice.

"We have special horses for beginners," Rachel assured her. "And besides you're in good company with Karen and Cindy. They've been coming around for several years and know almost as much as I do about trail riding."

"So they were boasting, and talking about buying their own horses from your lot. Better watch out or next thing you know they'll own the place," John teased.

"I'm doing my best to prevent that from happening," Rachel came back slightly defensive. "I'd better get out to the corral and bring in the horses...meet you in the stables when you've finished eating."

"See you," the others chimed.

Eager to start the wilderness tour Rachel made her way out to the corral to get the horses and came upon Drew who was bridling Hotspice. "I hope you're not planning to go riding this morning," she said to him.

"Aye, I am," he nodded and started with the horse toward the stables.

"We can't both go--" Rachel march along side into the building.

"Have you a mind to go riding?" he asked noticably surprised.

"Yes," she informed the cowboy out flatly.

Drew tied Hotspice along side the other three horses selected for

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the trails. He took up a currycomb and started working through the bay's unkempt mane. "Those riding are responsible for doing that," Rachel added while catching sight of the riding gear already pulled from the tack room.

"Forgive my interferring," Drew quipped and handed over the brush.

"Look—Drew, I'm sorry," she called after him. "It's just that I've got a touch of cabin fever."

"A good morning's ride will remedy that..." he paused to say.

"Besides, you ride every day. It's my turn," Rachel added.

"By all means go—" Drew dropped the matter and went to help with the daily stable chores.

Rachel set about checking the horses none of which in her opinion were suitable for a beginner as timid as Margret. Back to the corral she took Hotspice and brought Amber a gentler more experienced ride. When the four guests arrived at the stables she directed the Chicago couple on gearing up. "Okay, Marge, point your toes up..." Having helped her mount into the saddle Rachel stepped back to see what else of the woman's position needed adjusting. "Hold the reins up in front of the horn, not resting on it."

Drew came back around to adjust the stirrup lengths. "Hotspice too green for you, aye?"

"Don't you check to see how experienced the riders are before selecting the horses?" Rachel asked with an authoritative air.

"Old Hotspice don't bite," Drew replied cross-eyed.

"Amber's been around longer," Rachel spoke up. "Hug the horse with your legs, Marge...there...now sit straight and we'll get going. The terrian does have a few steep slopes and a stream to cross, nothing

these horses can't handle." Rachel went to mount Lucky but Drew grabbed her forearm and pointed to Amber's rear leg. "Look there—"

"What?" she asked allowing her glance to follow the point of his finger.

"A corner crack in the left hoof." He released her arm and bent down to examine the hoof closer. "I'll need to replace the shoe to keep it from spreading."

"You've a good eye." Rachel began to realize the extent of the cowboy's worth.

"Your cousin Bill didn't recommend me for the job just because I wanted it," Drew replied proud of having spotted the crack before anymore damage occurred.

"I reckon you're right about that," Rachel said overwhelmed with a sense of relief to discover that this hired hand genuinely cared. "I'll get Hotspice—" she added. Marge dismounted and a team effort quickly transferred the gear from the injured horse to the capable one. Then the riders headed for the trails with Rachel in the lead. Drew stood on the threshold of the stables and watched her long blond hair ripple in the wind.

The telephone rang three times before he noticed and ran into the tack room to answer the call. It was Zelda Sterling's voice coming over the wire. She had landed at the Great Falls airport and requested a ride immediately. Drew jumped into the ranch pick-up truck and started along the dirt road toward the highway.

An hour and a half later he arrived at the terminal and located Zelda Sterling who was dressed in a yellow suit and standing apart from the crowd. Beneath the wide brim of a straw hat was a face strikingly

familiar. Her sparkling blue eyes and milky white complexion bore a strong resemblance to Rachel. He walked over to the woman, "Mrs. Sterling, Drew MacLeod at your service," and offered a handshake.

"Mr. MacLeod, how good to meet you finally after all I've heard from Bill about you—"

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"How did you know which one I was?" Zelda put him at ease.

"Your daughter's a spitting image," he replied.

"How kind." The woman regarded him with an inquisitive glance.

"Uh, the desk attendant is holding my luggage," she added and proceeded over to the counter and loaded Drew's arms with suitcases which he carried out to the truck in the parking lot.

"This old truck has been around since I first came to the ranch. I'll have to see that Rachel trades it in for something else," Zelda told him as they started along the highway.

"Have you been homesick for that sight?" Drew pointed to the mountains arising out of the prairie in the near distance.

"A little," admitted Zelda who had left in February. "But, I've really come to pack the rest of our belongings. A van will be around to get them in a few days—"

"Sounds like you're pulling out altogether," Drew commented.

"And I wish Rachel would do the same," Zelda replied contemplatively. "By the way how is she? Does she get along well with managing the ranch?"

"Aye," Drew hesitated, not having an objective point-of-view to offer.

"Come now, Mr. MacLeod that question wasn't intended for a yes or

no answer." Drew shifted uneasily on the seat and kept his eyes glued to the highway that was taking them into the foothills. "Tell me, have there been many men calling at the ranch for her?"

"I don't keep tabs on your daughter's social life." He steered the vehicle around a hairpin curve in the two-lane road.

"If you intend to keep your job I suggest you start," Zelda replied coolly. "Contrary to what you might think Rachel is still very young for the position of managing a ranch the size and stature of ours. Some one might get it in their head to take advantage of her. If there are any suitors I wish to know about them—"

"The only man I noticed was that Ryan fellow," Drew disclosed in an agitated manner.

"Ryan who?" Zelda had the gumption of a dentist able to pull teeth from any one's mouth. And she was furious that Rachel had not spoken of the man during their telephone conversations.

"Mr. Jesse Ryan from California—claimed to be the new owner of Simmon Pass."

"I do believe I hear some contempt in your voice," Zelda smiled. "How often does he come around?"

"Haven't seen him since a night in May." Drew glanced out the corner of his eye to see Zelda's pursed lips and heaved a sigh of relief when she asked no more questions. It made the remainder of the trip more easy to contend with.

The lodge with the greenery of the forest behind it and the snow capped mountain peaks looking down on it from the heavens, returned the smile to the widow's face when the pick-up rounded the bend in the dirt road. "It really is beautiful, isn't it," she commented softly. "But

nothing will be the same anymore without Ben. I just as soon sell it and put that part of my life behind me..."

"Sell it, you say?" Drew brought the vehicle to a rolling stop in front of the lodge.

"Yes," Zelda replied firmly. "I'm looking for a buyer if you happen to know of any one who might be interested and so endowed—"

"Not off-hand," he replied and climbed out of the truck and started unloading the luggage. Zelda went ahead to the flat and held the door when he came bringing the weighty totes. "Rachel's out riding the trails this morning."

"I should have known," Zelda sighed. "Well, thank you for your help."

"Ma'am." From the doorway Drew tipped his stetson hat and departed.

Mid-day Rachel hobbled into the lobby. Her legs ached from the fifteen mile horseback ride. She planned on retreating to her private living quarters for a long soak in a hot tub but first stopped by the registration desk to check on the mail, and found Drew tending it. "The trail a bit too long for you?" he grinned while sorting through the stacks.

"No," Rachel said paying more attention to the letters than his teasing. "I could have used your help when we came in," she added. "Where's our desk attendant?"

"Your mother, Zelda, let them go and asked me to fill-in," he replied.

Rachel glanced up from the short stack of mail in hand. "What? When did she get here?"

"I picked her up at the airport around ten. Didn't you know she was coming?"

"No—" Rachel suddenly grew nervous.

"She's in the office—" Drew replied with a throw of the head.

Rachel rushed around the side of the registration desk and brushed through the doorway of the small office room crowded with a large oak desk, two Elizabethan arm chairs, and a filing cabinet. "Mother—" The interruption brought Zelda to her feet. Rachel engulfed her in a full embrace.

"Rachel—" Zelda responded less warmly. "What a welcome, Dear."

"I'm so glad you came. I was afraid after that spat we had last January...Did Drew tell you? We have five new foals," she boasted.

"Yes, he mentioned it." Zelda closed the door and sat down in a chair behind the desk.

Rachel hesitated. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to meet you at the airport."

"Nonsense," Zelda waved a dismissive hand. "I wasn't at all sure of coming until I stepped onto the plane."

"Mother, why not come?" Rachel finally took a seat in an arm chair opposite the large oak desk behind which Zelda sat, a poised, collected lady with an air of society about her. The face that spent twenty-four years in the wilderness now had a polished, citified glow.

"I wasn't pleased to see things running the way they were when I arrived," Zelda readily changed the subject.

"So I heard—you fired the desk attendants," Rachel took advantage of the opportunity to inquire further about the incident.

"I fired them, yes! Those girls should not be left responsible for

the comfort of the guests. They're—too clumsy and inexperienced for the job. Besides, we're overstaffed." One way or another Zelda was bound and determined to get Rachel into a more ladylike atmosphere, day to day. "I want only the permanent staff sitting behind that desk," Zelda informed her.

"But there are only three of us—" Rachel protested. "How can you expect us to manage?"

"You'll manage. Your father and I did for twenty some years. All it takes is a little know how. Here." She took hold of a piece of paper on the desk and leaned forward to explain. "I've written out a schedule. Between seven and ten in the morning take care of the day's question like which is the best hiking trail for old folks. Between noon and two in the afternoon there is always mail to distribute and bills to record. Between four and seven-thirty in the evening guests arrive and the telephone rings with reservation requests. Now, the hours that no one is tending the desk the cooks and others should be aware of where you are in case any one needs help," Zelda added, quite secure with the arrangement.

"But—what about the horses?"

"Mr. MacLeod seems competent enough to take care of the horses, Dear."

"Oh, he's very competent." Rachel passively returned her attention to the envelope that had arrived without a return address.

"What is it?" Zelda became interested in the look on her daughter's face as her eyes skimmed the opened letter. "Rachel, who is that from?"

"Uh—no one you know." Folding the paper into the envelope Rachel

glanced back at her mother. "I must say the East suits you well." Besides avoiding the topic of Jesse Ryan's letter, her observation was true. Zelda Sterling never looked more vital and alive than she did sitting in the office of the Sterling lodge on this June afternoon. There was a serenity behind the make-up on her face for the first time since her husband died. "And you've cut your hair."

"Like it?" Zelda tossed her head from side to side modeling the wedged look that replaced a bun of long thick silver hair pinned for years at the nape of the neck.

"It becomes you, Mother," Rachel flattered out of habit.

"Thank you, Dear." Zelda folded her hands, momentarily on the desk top. Mother and daughter sat staring curiously at each other. "What's in the letter?" Zelda pleaded.

"A reservation request..from a friend," she replied partly.

"Any one I know?"

"I don't believe you do know Jesse Ryan." Rachel uneasily disclosed the information to Zelda's match-making mind.

"Ah, yes, Drew tells me he stayed a night in May."

"How did your conversation with Drew MacLeod ever get around to Jesse Ryan?" Zelda's investigative skill astounded Rachel at times.

"It was nothing but a passing comment," Zelda tried to reassure her. "When do you expect him?"

"Next week...he and his partner Jake Ebb have asked to stay here while they build a house on Simmon Pass," Rachel added.

"Ryan...Ryan...could this be the same fellow who inherited the Chateau St. Johanna in California?"

"You know him?"

"Know of him," Zelda corrected. "Mr. Ryan's winery estate is nothing to snub your nose at. Rachel, you really do yourself a disfavor by refusing to come to Boston. His kind do not go looking for their wives on breeding ranches in Montana. And your cousins would love to have you to show off to some of their eligible bachelor friends."

"Your idea of eligible and mine don't always mesh," Rachel interrupted. "And you forget I met him here."

"Mere chance," Zelda replied to her daughter whose eyes rolled toward the window of the office that overlooked a plush green lawn. "Let me tell you a little something...When I met Ben Sterling I immediately realized that no one needs etiquette to move to Montana. You just do it. Moving from this ranch to a prominent position in society is altogether different. Certain things are expected of ladies and can only be learned—"

"I'm not a lady, I'm a woman," Rachel said.

"Yes, I see that now." Zelda leaned slightly forward with watering eyes. "You're serious about staying here on the ranch, aren't you?"

"I am."

Zelda sighed audibly. "What about this Ryan fellow?"

"He's very handsome, Mother. If you wait another week you can meet him yourself."

"I may stay then," Zelda replied with a note of finality and opted to postpone going over the ledgers spread out on the desk for review.

In an amused sort of way Rachel accepted the arrangement of Zelda's staying on as long as it did not interfere seriously in her own daily affairs. "Welcome home, Mother." She stood to leave the office for the bathtub.

"Thank you, Dear." Zelda accompanied her out the door. "I checked the guest list and see that the Adams are here with their twins. The boys must be about—"

"They're fourteen years old and full of the devil," Drew, still perched on a stool at the registration desk, remarked.

"They're helping Drew saddle break some of the yearlings," Rachel added for Zelda's benefit. "Two of which I hope to sell to them before they leave for Texas."

"You spend your life in a barn," Zelda muttered confidentially to her daughter and walked on past the desk and across the lobby toward the diningroom.

"Your mother should have been a puppeteer," Drew said while figeting with a row of numbers on a scratch paper at the desk.

"What a rude thing to say!" Rachel responded.

Drew dropped his pencil and glanced up from the figures strewn sporadically across the page. "Sometimes the truth is rude," he said. Rachel frowned. "Look, I don't enjoy some one else pulling my strings. If you want to dance to her tune—go right ahead." His brown eyes zeroed in on her face. Rachel stood absentmindedly gazing into them. "If you'll excuse me." Drew reached for his stetson hat and fit it down onto a wealth of brown hair touched with gold by the sun. The positon of the rim tilted slightly over those eyes made him appear older, wiser than she had ever given him credit for.

"Where you going?" Rachel took a side step as he tore the scratch paper from the pad and departed. She could smell his cologne passing by. It was a subtle aroma pleasing to the senses.

"Out to the stable."

"What about the desk?" Rachel became flustered.

"Tend it—" he suggested and closed the lobby door on the way out.

Having no choice Rachel slumped onto the seat behind the desk. Her muscles ached for a hot tub. She took out Jesse Ryan's letter and started thumbing through the reservation book. Several parties of guests would have to cancel their reservations in order to make available two rooms for the duration the architects planned to stay. The unsuspecting men were apt to find themselves sleeping in the bunk house. Rachel crossed her fingers and wrote a note to Jesse confirming the reservations anyway.

The day came for Jesse Ryan and Jake Ebb to arrive at the lodge. Zelda was there tending the front desk during the evening. After keeping a watchful eye throughout the day she finally took a seat in order not to miss these particular guests' arrival. Pretending not to notice when two men walked into the lobby, Zelda preoccupied herself with a calendar, juggling reservation requests until Jesse Ryan and Jake Ebb interrupted with an introduction.

"Ah," Zelda readily extended her hand to each of the men. "Mr. Ryan, Rachel told me she was expecting you and to be sure to give you a hearty welcome. Pity she isn't here to receive you herself." She frowned over the fact but quickly regained composure. "Did you drive?"

"Yes, from California," Jesse replied.

"An exhausting trip." Zelda started around the side of the desk, a moment for which she had gone through a great deal of trouble. The canceling of some previously confirmed reservations was proving to be a strenuous exercise in diplomacy, an exercise she would rather have gone without. The alternative choice was to house these two gentlemen in the bunk house. "Let me show you gentlemen to your rooms. Afterall, you are going to stay for several months, no sense taking a room that does not suit your tastes. Four and eight each with a private bath are among the best rooms in the lodge...I'm afraid four hasn't a very exciting view however—"

"Four and eight sound just fine." Jesse took the keys right out of her hand and came close to putting her out of humor. But that his broad

The day came for Jesse Ryan and Jake Ebb to arrive at the lodge. Zelda was there tending the front desk during the evening. After keeping a watchful eye throughout the day she finally took a seat in order not to miss these particular guests' arrival. Pretending not to notice when two men walked into the lobby, Zelda preoccupied herself with a calendar, juggling reservation requests until Jesse Ryan and Jake Ebb interrupted with an introduction.

"Ah," Zelda readily extended her hand to each of the men. "Mr. Ryan, Rachel told me she was expecting you and to be sure to give you a hearty welcome. Pity she isn't here to receive you herself." She frowned over the fact but quickly regained composure. "Did you drive?"

"Yes, from California," Jesse replied.

"An exhausting trip." Zelda started around the side of the desk, a moment for which she had gone through a great deal of trouble. The canceling of some previously confirmed reservations was proving to be a strenuous exercise in diplomacy, an exercise she would rather have gone without. The alternative choice was to house these two gentlemen in the bunk house. "Let me show you gentlemen to your rooms. Afterall, you are going to stay for several months, no sense taking a room that does not suit your tastes. Four and eight each with a private bath are among the best rooms in the lodge...I'm afraid four hasn't a very exciting view however—"

"Four and eight sound just fine." Jesse took the keys right out of her hand and came close to putting her out of humor. But that his broad

smile quickly reestablished. "We won't trouble you anymore about it."

"As you like." Zelda gracefully bowed out and retreated to the seat behind the desk and took up the calendar task once more. She glanced surreptitiously after the men climbing the staircase to the second floor balcony.

Moments later Rachel appeared at the desk to inquire whether or not Jesse had arrived as scheduled. She was dismayed to see Zelda sitting there like a watch guard, but not the least bit surprised.

"You missed him, Dear," Zelda said, aloofly talking through pursed lips and peering over the rim of her reading glasses. "They're tired and promptly went to their rooms."

"Tomorrow's another day." Rachel tried to conceal her eagerness to see Jesse Rayn but had returned in early from a day of weaning the foals from the mares and gone directly to shower. The fresh clothing that did not carry the smell of horse in its fabric betrayed her to her mother's eyes.

"Tomorrow soon turns into years." Zelda shook her head. "Well, since you are here, watch after the desk, uh? I need to make some telephone calls and wish not to be bothered for the rest of the evening." She excused herself and retired to the Sterling's private flat.

Rachel's heart skipped a beat when she saw Jesse Ryan descending the staircase and looking all the while in her direction. "Good evening," she called to him from across the lobby.

"Hello," he replied.

"How was your trip?" she asked as he drew nearer.

"Fair." He approached the desk with an air of confidence about

him. "How is the breeding business these days?"

"Fair," she echoed mindlessly. "Did you drive?"

"Yes. That's my blue Carrea parked out in the lot."

Rachel laughed. "I hope you aren't planning to drive that car on the trail at Simmon Pass. It will be impossible."

"I suppose you have a point there." Jesse pondered the circumstance a moment. "We'll need to buy a jeep then won't we?" Rachel had never meet any one so carefree with a dollar. She did not know if he was serious about the purchase or joking. "Did I notice a porch swing?" Jesse casually pointed toward the double doors of the lobby. He put the question across with quiet finesse.

"Most likely," she replied. "There is one out there."

"Shall we?"

"Some one's got to tend the desk, Jesse," she backhandedly denied the part of her that wanted nothing more than to spend a summer's eve on the porch swing with him.

"Rachel, I've come all this long way to see you and you cannot leave the desk?" He cocked an eyebrow over a troubled blue iris.

"Alright, if you put it that way," Rachel gave in to his plea realizing it was almost seven-thirty and time to close the desk anyway. "But, it doesn't mean that I have forgiven you for not writing more than once and a short little reservation request at that."

"I'm not one for letterwriting," he told her as arm in arm they strolled out onto the porch. The evening was growing old by ranch standards. The moon had crested over the eastern mountain peaks. It shone brightly on the landscape and cast tall shadows of pine trees across the lawn while traces of the bright summer sun outlined the

mountain peaks to the west. Rachel took a seat on the porch swing with Jesse and sat listening. The songs of crickets and owls played background music to the low hum of human voices coming from inside the lodge. "A bit chilly tonight," Jesse commented while putting an arm around her.

"Better get used to the cool evenings if you plan to stay long," Rachel informed him.

"As a matter of fact I plan to stay until harvest time," he reaffirmed the dates written in his scant letter.

"I'm looking forward to it." Rachel glanced sidelong at the man. She had almost forgotten how completely his presence captivated her. A wind of fresh air arose and rustled the pine branches hanging over the porch roof. She snuggled toward him slightly. "Smells good, doesn't it?" she asked drawing it in to fill her lungs.

"Very." Jesse nuzzled his nose into the thick matt of blond hair that flowed over her shoulders.

"Another week and the meadows are going to be covered with a rainbow of color. Jesse, we'll have to go riding some time, take a picnic and spend the day. I just love the meadows in full bloom—how about next Saturday?"

"Darling," he said, tilting her head back with a touch of a finger. "I'll be working on construction of the house."

"Then, we'll go Sunday," she declared.

"Sorry."

"You're certainly not going to work every day?" she asked growing less and less comfortable sitting there.

"Those are the plans," he replied caring little about altering a

set schedule.

"One afternoon—" Rachel qualified. She had been looking forward to riding with him ever since his letter arrived.

"I'll see."

Rachel accepted those words to be a commitment to a time in the future. Though it was an indefinite note that hung in the air as their bodies swayed with the rhythm of the porch swing. Heavy footsteps intruded from behind. Rachel glanced over the shoulder to find Drew MacLeod leaning against the doorframe of the lobby entranceway. His thumbs hung limply from jean pockets. The faded material showed more wear at the knees fraying. His tanned face lacked expression but his eyes bore anger. "Drew?" Rachel sat up to inquire of him.

"Where's Zelda?" He demanded to know taking a few more steps forward his leather boot heels sounded against the wooden floor.

"Watch your manner, Cowboy," Jesse warned. "You're talking to the boss."

"The name's MacLeod," Drew raised his voice to the man.

"My mother retired for the rest of the evening," Rachel stated flatly.

Drew snickered. "In the flat is she?"

"Something wrong?" Rachel wondered from the distraught expression the cowboy's face bore.

"Aye. It is," he replied in a clipped manner and proceeded down the front staircase and disappeared around the side of the lodge.

His loud rap on the window pane brought a startled Zelda scurrying to the kitchen door of the flat. She peeked to see who was calling before opening the door to let him enter. "Zelda." Drew managed to

harness his temper before stepping over the threshold into the kitchen. Zelda closed the door behind him. Drew turned to face her. "A few moments ago I received a telephone call from—a friend. He informed me that his reservation at the lodge has been canceled. Apparently, you spoke to him this evening also—"

Zelda grew flustered not having expected such immediate repercussions from the devious deed. "I needed two rooms for some prominent guests and picked the least familiar names to cancel out—"

"Prominent guests—" Drew laughed contemptuously. "Like who? Ryan? Did you know that he has your daughter on the porch swing this very minute and is feeding her a line?"

"On the porch swing are they." Zelda refused to listen to the rest of the report. "I'm happy that she's finally taking an interest in some one."

"So that's it." Drew put two and two together. "As for my uncle, Bert MacLeod, he's not prominent enough for your guest list?" He stood gaping at the callousness of the woman.

"Oh, my." Zelda's hand flew to her face in awestruck wonder once she realized what had been done. "Drew," she took him gently by the forearm. "You must forgive me." She led the cowboy into the livingroom and reached for a telephone list on the coffee table. "I'll call him right back—"

"And give him some one else's reservation?" Drew would not hear of trading one mistake for another. Zelda frettingly sank down onto the cushion of a green velvet arm chair. She ran fingers findly over the couch Ben had designed expressly for that room. It fit the decor most precisely along with the rest of the hand-crafted furnishings in the

flat. She had decided to leave the artifacts behind when the van came to pack. Drew broke the silence with a clearing of the throat. "I invited Bert to visit because he is looking for an investment. You mentioned wanting to sell the ranch—"

"It's a nuisance commuting cross country," Zelda replied.

"He's interested in making a purchase," Drew stressed.

Zelda looked up studiously. "Would your Uncle Bert mind terribly sleeping in the bunk house?" Her head stopped spinning at the thought of finding a buyer for the place.

"Being a cowboy himself, I recon he might consider it," Drew said.

"Have him look the place over at his own convenience," Zelda urged. "I'm leaving for Boston in a few day. If he likes the place give me a call and we'll arrange a meeting." Satisfied, Drew stood to leave. "On one condition," Zelda stopped him from going. "Not a word to Rachel about any of this until it's finalized."

"I think it only fair to tell her," Drew protested.

"I don't want her upset about it. Mum's the word or no deal," Zelda replied with a smile that won out.

Beneath the rim of his stetson hat was a face torn between commitment and conscience as Drew left the flat. In a somber mood he walked along the side of the lodge. His eyes were drawn to the healthy fields of barley and hay growing in the distance. Tilling the soil during the spring had been his first experience at producing a crop. The sight of thin stalks bursting forth from the earth filled him with a sense of the land. Land he wanted to belong to.

VI

Rachel finished helping the cook fill dinner orders for the evening meal, and decided to check on the diningroom. She was curious about the number of plates that had gone out of the kitchen. It exceeded the number of lodgers registered. Her glance scanned across the eight tables and lit on the one where Jesse Ryan and company were seated. For a moment she remained indecisive about approaching the table. She went the long way around to that side of the room, greeted all the guests and finally came to his side.

"How's the food?" She stood anxiously awaiting a reply.

"Delicious—" Jesse threw her a casual glance.

"Hits the spot," Jake claimed between bites.

"I'm happy to hear that. Maybe you boys will visit our diningroom more often than," Rachel said suggesting that they had seen very little of each other the past six weeks.

"Tonight's the first we've had time for a sit down dinner since starting construction." Jesse wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin and stood to offer her the empty chair at the table. "Have a seat, Darling."

"I've only got a minute," she replied while taking a seat beside him. Rachel had nothing urgent to do but hated to let on to Jesse Ryan that his presence took priority over the other facets of her life.

"Are you hungry?" Jesse reached for her hand resting on the table top and caressed it.

"No—I ate in the kitchen or should I say test-tasted the menu."

She sought to pull her hand away when he started inspecting the callouses and tattered nails.

"I should buy you a pair of riding gloves," he commented.

"I have two pair," she told him. "Somehow my work gets the better of these hands just the same."

"Ladies hands weren't made to work so hard," he concluded. "By the way, Rachel meet Kurt and George, two of the construction crew we imported from California to help build that solar design."

"Pleased to meet you," she greeted the other men at the table with a smile. "How is the project coming along?"

"The frame work of the house is in place," Kurt bragged.

"As a matter of fact we're celebrating," Jake informed her.

"Congratulations, I'd like to see it sometime," Rachel said.

"Next month when it's finished," Jesse butted in.

"Okay." Rachel settled with that date even though it was a long way off. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll check on dessert." She went back into the kitchen and helped fill dessert orders. Since it was one of two cooks' day off, clean-up stole the rest of her evening. Little had she known before taking over as fill-in launderer, desk attendant, cook, accountant and hostess that Zelda used to put in similiar days on the ranch. Rachel wiped the last of the kitchen counters clean. It dawned her that she had only led one wilderness tour all summer. The wall clock read nine-thirty. Dissatisfied with circumstance she headed for bed.

On the way through the lobby Rachel noticed Jesse and crew engaged in a game of cards around the fireplace. It came as a surprised to see them spending leisure time at the lodge. Her heart beat skipped with

the hope of a new trend though she honestly did not know where there would be time in a day to spend with him anyway.

"Rachel—" Jesse paid heed to her walking by. "Care to join us?"

"What are you playing?" She sent her footsteps in a new direction.

"Five card draw," Jake explained. "And I'm losing."

"Come on," Jesse urged. "The night's too young to call."

Pausing beside the circle Rachel noticed the chips on the table.

"Five card draw that's a poker game."

"That's right," one of the crew members remarked while studying his newly dealt card hand.

"There's no gambling allowed in the lodge," she told them out flatly. "I would appreciate it if you fold for the night."

"Listen, Darling." Jesse reached for her hand and nonchalantly kissed the back of it. "We've been working awfully long hours lately and need a little relaxation activity. Now, I'm positive if we promise to keep it low the guests upstairs will never know the difference between this and a friendly game of hearts."

"Sorry, Jesse—house rules—"

"Bend the rules," he said dismissing the matter.

"If you need to gamble I suggest taking it elsewhere," she replied decisively and withdrew her hand from his touch.

"In a minute." Jesse, holding two aces and three kings, proceeded to up the ante of the card game. "We'll just play this one last hand—"

Humiliated, Rachel stood back tapping her foot. None of the men were paying any attention whatsoever. She paced the length of the lobby a couple of times, finding it hard to believe that Jesse Ryan actually

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ignored her request. After all the trouble she had gone through to secure his comfort for the summer, this was her reward! She hated her own vulnerability to the charms of the man. He must have gotten a laugh out of seeing her cater to his every whim and fancy. "Oh—" Rachel stepped out onto the porch for a breath of fresh air and to gather her wits.

Some one was crossing the front lawn. The strut unmistakably belonged to Drew. Rachel took a seat on the front railing and spied on the cowboy from within the shadows of the porch roof. She admired his stamina and secretly thanked heaven for bringing him to the ranch. For without his putting in long hours an average work day she feared the place never would have held together thus far. "I left you a plate in the refrigerator," she said when the sole of his boots hit the porch.

Drew stopped and peered about. The corners of his mouth curved sedately when his glance meet hers. "What's the menu?" He took a few steps toward her.

"Meat and potatoes and gravy," she replied. "There's also some tossed salad leftover and a piece of German Chocolate cake if you're interested."

"I'm right tired of eating leftovers," he told her. "What do you say about my taking you out to dinner tomorrow tonight?"

"We can't both leave the ranch at the same time and you know it," Rachel declined though found the offer flattering.

"Aye, you're afraid of being seen co-mingling with hired help."

"I am not—"

Drew threw her a glance filled with challenge to prove it then started to walk into the lobby.

"Drew—" Rachel jumped to her feet and ran after him.

"Had a change of heart have you?" He turned around. They nearly collided.

"It's not that—I--"

"You're upset." He studied her face. "What about?"

"I asked the men in the lobby to stop gambling," she confided.

"How long does it take to play a last hand?"

"Last hand," Drew mocked in disbelief and walked through the front doors. He paused on the landing and reviewed the situation before moving toward the circle. Rachel scurried across the lobby to accompany him. "Drew," she caught up to his side. "Be nice," a whispered plea.

"I'll handle this my way," he rebuked the foolish request and cleared his throat. "Looks like we have a problem on our hands," he said in a deep commanding voice. The players each glanced up from their cards and winced at the sight of the stocky cowboy come calling. "I'm going to have to ask you boys to leave—"

"Quit squawking, Cowboy. We're history as soon as the hand's been played out," Jesse threw the remark over his shoulder. He was intent on winning yet another pot before the night was out.

"It's time to go—" Drew grabbed Jesse by the shirt collar, a gesture that brought the architect to his feet. And as Jesse stood he pushed the cowboy in the chest. "Drew—" Rachel tried to stop a fight to no avail. A clenched fist smacked Jesse square in the jaw. The tall man stumbled backward onto the table strewn with cards and money and poker chips. "That's enough." Rachel grabbed for Drew's hand but Jesse's arm came from behind and pushed her aside. "Out on the lawn, MacLeod—" The builders rallied behind their leader. "No—" Rachel

found herself volleying between the two men. "Stop it, both of you." Her hurt glance fell to the architect.

"Okay," Jesse backed off. "You don't want gambling in the lobby, we'll pack it up and move out to Simmon Pass." His words were dressed with a note of revenge and self-pity.

"You got ten minutes—" Drew pressed on to call the bluff.

"Drew." Rachel turned in protest to face the cowboy.

"Jake—" Jesse said to his partner. "Let's check out of this joint."

"Didn't mean to create a ruckus," Jake apologized on the way by. The other two builders silently began to gather the strewn cards and poker chips and money from around the fireplace. Several lodgers peering down from the balcony slowly retreated into their rooms and closed the doors.

"There was no call for losing your temper like that," Rachel said to Drew.

"I'll see you in the flat after I get a rent check from these boys on their way out the door," was his counter reply.

Rachel was unaccustomed to obeying orders from any one, save Zelda on occasion. That Drew assumed complete charge of the situation had her on edge. "They're not leaving because I'm going to apologize—" As much as a nuisance Jesse Ryan could be, she still harbored a deep attraction toward the man. The thought of his taking up quarters at the construction sight was unthinkable. Their chances of seeing each other were already practically nil.

"You'll do no such thing," Drew challenged.

"Your right—it's your doing—you apologize—"

"Losing their patronage doesn't bother me in the least," he refused to accept the terms. "They're only getting what they deserve."

"What do you mean?" Rachel demanded.

"The lodge was booked full for the summer season when their reservation request came in," he stated factually.

"Luckily enough cancellations came in or those men would have been staying with you in the bunk house," she said ignorant of the truth.

"For your benefit, Zelda arranged that neat string of cancellations. My uncle happened to be one of the 'unfamiliar' names she dropped from the guest list. No telling how many other horse connoisseurs she put off by that little game," Drew disclosed angrily.

"I don't believe you—" Rachel's jaw dropped. "Why would she ever do a thing like that—"

"There is a whole lot more going on behind your back." He made a point of staring, causing the blush to rush to her cheeks. Despite herself she cast a glance aside to avoid the allure of his eyes. "She's planning to sell the ranch anyway she can."

"Jesse Ryan's not interested in buying the place."

"The timber could become very attractive if the price drops much further." Drew banked on the assumption.

"That's nothing but chit-chat," Rachel said needing to affirm authority. "This is my home."

Drew, judging that it was not an opportune moment to discuss with her the future of the Sterling ranch, held back the confession. He let the matter rest and went to make out a bill at the registration desk. Rachel, seeing that he was not about to make amends, went to meet the guests descending the staircase. "Jesse, Jake, things got out of hand.

I want to apologize on behalf of the lodge and ask you to stay."

"Sorry, Darling, we like the freedom to play a bit of poker now and again." Jesse motioned to the crew members. "We'll get the bill paid and be on our way." He stepped around her and continued over to the desk. Rachel followed. "What's the figure?" Jesse pulled out a check and started filling in the blanks. Drew cited an amount and recorded the payment when it was handed over. Rachel stood silently and watched the guests walk out without even saying good-bye. "Satisfied?" She turn to Drew.

"Not quite," he replied. "My stomach's still hankering for dinner," and left her for the kitchen.

VII

The chill of autumn settled into the valley overnight bringing on disquietude. The end of summer season was but a few days away. All in all it had been a trying time with Zelda's threat to sell the ranch directing Rachel's every action in an attempt to prove herself worthy of the family inheritance. She feared the final judgment was impending once the season's ledgers were closed. No form of negligence had occurred on which to base the fear. It was rather her mother's unexplainable fervor to get rid of the place that Rachel found bothersome. Despite the worries of the day she went about enjoying her favorite foal in the training arena. From Ben Sterling, one of the best horse trainers in the west, Rachel acquired the skill she hoped would sustain the Sterling ranch reputation for excellence in quarter horses. Aware of the influence early handling cast on the horse's disposition as it matured, she insisted on fitting the sessions into a tight schedule, trusting the duty to no one else. She worked with patience and the utmost care to prevent the onset of bucking or biting habits. Bitterroot was receiving his sixth and final lesson with ease. She walked beside the prancing foal, keeping a rein in one hand and a bucket of oats in the other.

"Rachel—" Louanna Pines waved from the fence.

"Hi." She returned the wave of a friend who had been absent most of the summer and released the foal from its hackamore. "I think we have a champion to look forward to," she said and climbed onto the fence

for a mid-morning rest. Bitterroot came a pace behind to greet the visitor.

"What's your name?" Louanna held out a hand to the approaching animal.

"Bitterroot—"

"I'll call you Precious," she said, leaning over to pet the foal. "I went up to the lodge first, was surprised to see Bill sitting behind the registration desk." Louanna giggled. "He looks out of place and unhappy I might add. What is going on?"

"Zelda doesn't want any one but me, Drew, or Bill taking responsibility for seeing to the guests' needs...I've been helping train horses since I was seven and she insists on putting me behind the desk!"

"Maybe she wishes you were more like her," Louanna commented.

"The fact is I'm not," Rachel proclaimed. "By the way where have you been all summer?"

"Oh—" Louanna shrugged, reluctant to disclose the information.

"Never mind." Rachel surmised from the secretive smile claiming her friend's freckled face that she had been preoccupied with a certain Mr. Ebb. A second glance told her this summer fling had taken on a more serious air. Rachel suddenly felt lonely. Other summers Louanna had spent much of her free time at the ranch, to the point that Zelda began passing her off as another daughter.

"I'll tell you. Ever since Jake got kicked out of the lodge he's been staying at my house," Louanna replied. "Pa and him don't exactly see eye to eye. So I stay around to referee."

"I'm sorry Jake happened to get caught in the middle that night. I don't know why—Drew completely lost his temper—"

"I'll tell you why," Louanna said plainly. "That cowboy is jealous of your goggling over Jesse Ryan."

"Drew MacLeod jealous?" The revelation caught Rachel unaware. "But there is nothing going on between Jesse and me." The handsome architect had not been seen nor heard from since that night of the fight.

"I've seen you look at Jesse and I'm willing to bet that's precisely why Drew's buying the ranch."

"What?" Rachel exclaimed.

"He didn't tell you?" Louanna frowned. "Why that lowdown cowboy. He and his uncle came strutting into the Melody Rose the other night and were talking up a storm about it. Some of the locals were commenting on how smart Zelda was for putting it on the market and congratulating Drew. Apparently our neighbors don't have much confidence in your ability to make a go of it."

"Where is Drew ever going to get the money?" Rachel asked in disbelief.

"Uncle Bert's cattle spread near Calgary," Louanna informed her. "If you ask me Drew's trying to buy you in the process. If Zelda sells the ranch you'll have no other choice than to marry him so you can stay here. He knows you don't want to move to Boston. I mean you parading around to parties in long gowns and pearls? Rachel—Boston may suit Zelda, fine. But you would be lost without your boots and stetson hat, and Drew MacLeod knows it. He also knows that without authority and power over the ranch he'll never get your attention. At least not while Jesse Ryan's around."

Thinking back on the other day Rachel recalled seeing Bert MacLeod

nonchalantly standing at a distance watching the foals in training. She was not sure how long he had been spying. At the time she attributed the curious behavior to his interest in horses. "Drew would have told me if he himself was interested in buying the ranch," Rachel said, trying to convince herself that the cowboy was not the kind who went about his business underhandedly. It made little difference that Louanna's explanation fit. He would not operate with so demeaning a purpose as to try and buy his way into her heart. Besides, it was not for sale.

"Want some advice?" Louanna offered.

"No—" Rachel said. "I've got to talk to Drew before I do anything."

"You doubting my word?" Louanna asked, offended.

"No—I just want to hear the truth from him before drawing any conclusions." Rachel jumped down from the fence and picked up the hackamore and bucket of oats from the ground.

"How can you trust a man like that to tell the truth?" Louanna jumped down into the arena and followed after Rachel following after the foal.

"Louanna—" Rachel turned around to put an end to the discussion. "Drew happens to be my friend."

"Speaking of friendship," she hesitated to press on. "We're throwing a party at the new house Saturday night. I could use help hostessing. Jesse will be there."

"It's his house, let him host the party," Rachel replied leery of putting herself so easily at the man's disposal.

"Rachel—" Louanna pleaded.

"Oh—I suppose I could put up with him for an evening," sighingly she made the commitment and went to catch the foal frolicking about the arena.

Before noon on Saturday Rachel arrived at the Pines' home to help Louanna bake cake for the party that evening. Thelma Pines greeted her at the door with a hug for old times sake. The gesture left Rachel aware of how little she visited with them these days, how little she visited with any one. Thankfully an end of season lull at the lodge afforded her time off. It was a welcomed change to spend the afternoon carefree, baking and frosting cake. When finished the women packed the dessert along with cases of champagne and soda and kegged beer into the red Nova. The closer to Simmon Pass they drove the more anxious Rachel grew. Jesse Ryan was about to come back into her life, for better or for worse.

"We should have planned an ox roast," Louanna fussed and turned the vehicle onto the trail leading into the pass. "What kind of hostess will they think I am? Cheap! That's what they'll think of Jake and his designs too. How could I have been so stupid?"

"Why are you getting so worked up over a simple house warming?" Rachel asked. Even the band from the dancehall was on loan for the gathering.

"Because, he invited a slew of potential customers to view the solar design and I want to help him make a good impression," Louanna defended her efforts. "You know how sceptical some of the ranchers can be of strangers."

"Stop worrying. Everything is going to turn out fine," Rachel replied in an effort to convince herself as well, as the house, looking

much like what she pictured from the blueprints, came into view. It stood alone on the edge of the prairie with mountain peaks for a backdrop. Trucks and vans were parked along the trail worn of trampled grass leading there. In the garage sat the blue Carrea. Members of the band crew took note of the women's arrival and came to help unload the crates of champagne and soda and beer. With that task taken care of Louanna insisted Rachel have a tour of the place. She showed off the first floor as if it were her own, arranging imaginary furniture along the way. "Wait until you see the bedrooms," Louanna exclaimed wide-eyed and started climbing the opened staircase to the second floor. The master bedroom was huge, stretching across the entire back of the house. It had a fireplace, two walk-in closets, an adjoining full bath, and sliding glass doors that led to the balcony boasting a spectacular view. Curious to see it all, Rachel stepped outside and stumbled onto Jesse Ryan staring contemplatively into space. "Excuse me," she said relieved at last that the long anticipated encounter had come. Jesse, who had been leaning against the railing, immediately straightened up.

"I guess I'll go look for Jake." Louanna left unnoticed.

"It's a beautiful house," Rachel commented in a detached manner.

"Yes, we're proud of it," he replied. "Rachel—I've been meaning to come over—"

"But you didn't," she butted in to keep a firm hold on emotion that stirred at the sight of him there alone, tall and handsome, and wanting her. She strolled over to the railing and looked down at the outdoor stage and dance floor set-up for the party. Jesse followed. "Listen, Jesse." She turned and faced the man while her heart pounded uncontrollably the way it had when they first met. "Let's just forget

the whole thing and try to enjoy ourselves tonight, okay?"

"Fine." A look of surprise came to his face to replace the furrowed forehead. "What time do you want me to pick you up?"

"I didn't mean for that to sound like a request for an escort. I'm perfectly capable of getting here on my own," she replied unwilling to grant him free reign over the evening.

"Rachel--" His hand reached out to stop her from leaving. "I have to go to California to check on the harvest. I want to see you before I go."

She paused at his side and searched his eyes and decided to accept the arrangement to discover once and for all if there was more than a fleeting heart throb between them. "The party starts at seven."

"I'll see you at seven then, at the lodge," he confirmed the date.

VIII

Rachel moped about the bedroom, donned outfit after outfit until the entire closet wardrobe lay in a heap upon the bed. Somehow every garment was ill fitting or the wrong color. Nothing fit the way she wanted it to. Everything was either too sporty or too old fashioned. She sat down on the edge of the bed and fretted. A voice echoing in the stairwell startled her out of deep contemplation. Rachel pulled a terrycloth robe over undergarments and ran to the railing. "Hello?" She leaned over and caught a glimpse of leather shoes on the landing in the livingroom.

"Evening." Jesse Ryan stepped into view. "I knocked but no one answered." He was dressed in grey pants and a white shirt complete with red vest and tie. The color brought out his ruddy complexion. His blue eyes studied her intensely. "You're not dressed."

"No—" she glanced down at the robe and bare feet. "I'm having a time of it trying to find something to wear."

"I take that is an invitation to come upstairs and dress you myself." His virile hand claimed the stair railing.

"Hold your horses, I'll be down in a few minutes." She hurried back down the hallway to the bedroom. Rachel leaned against the bedroom door closed behind her. Across the room lay a heap of clothing. From the middle emerged the sleeve of a red prairie dress, the color a perfect compliment to his grey and red. Without hesitation she donned the garment and a pair of dancing boots, ran a brush through her hair, dabbed on some lip gloss, and was ready to go, save her state of mind.

She descended the staircase to the livingroom and greeted Jesse with a composed smile.

"Couldn't have done a better job," he offered a hand. "You look lovely."

"Thank you," Rachel said and slipped her hand into his and was escorted out to the jeep in the parking lot. Jesse was absorbed in steering the vehicle around the tight corners on the stretch of highway between the ranch and Simmon Pass. Rachel found comfort in the lack of conversation. He was beside her, close enough to touch and that was all that seemed to matter.

As daylight faded into dusk across the mountain range, he parked the vehicle at the end of a long line of pick-up trucks leading to the solar design lit like a lantern with its many windowed walls. No one much noticed their entrance into the conglomeration of people. Jesse clasped her hand tightly and started to make a way through the crowd. Rachel nodded polite greetings in passing. Finally they reached the center of the room where Louanna and Jake were mingling about.

"Rachel—you're here—" Louanna exclaimed while not quite recovered from a case of the jitters.

"Every one seems to be having a fine time," Rachel said of the many jovial faces.

"So far so good."

"Stop worrying, Louanna, once the band starts playing no one will even be interested in eating," Jake consoled and with an arm around the waist drew her closer.

"I'll stop worrying when it's over," Louanna replied by lifting his hand from her hip. "Right now we've got to put the cake out and have a

hand from her hip. "Right now we've got to put the cake out and have a toast—Rachel will you help me in the kitchen?"

"That's why I came—" She started to following Louanna through the mass.

"Wait a minute—where are you going?" Jesse called after her.

"To help in the kitchen," she threw the remark over the shoulder and continued on despite the longing look he cast her way.

When the cake and cups, champagne and soda, forks and paper plates had been arranged neatly on the card tables in the diningroom, the architects ushered in the crowd. Jake prepared a speech of congratulations to the crew for their dedication and master craftsmanship, while Louanna, Rachel and Jesse distributed bottles of champagne for the toast. "To the crew that believed it could be done within three months' time...to those whose total commitment of twelve sometimes fifteen hour work days made a reality out of blueprints...to their wives who understood when their husbands didn't come home at night—" Hurrays sounded round the room. "On behalf of my partner, Jesse Ryan, and myself, I congratulate you on a job well done—enjoy." Champagne bottle tops popped, some flying through the air, some releasing fountains. Rachel caught Jesse's eye in the excitement of the moment and smiled, a gesture that brought him around the side of the table to her side. "What's that look about?" he asked nonchalantly reaching behind her for a bottle of champagne.

"Just a smile," she shrugged.

"That was more than just a smile." With a quick and calculated flick of the thumb he popped the top off the bottle. "Something's going on inside that head of yours..."

"Oh?" Rachel inquired.

Jesse, cocking an eyebrow, started to pour the champagne into two cups on the table. He handed one over but refused to let it go when she grasped it. "Tell me what you were thinking about me just now."

Rachel laughed nervously. "To be honest, I wasn't—"

"Come now, Rachel," Jesse urged in a low tone. "We might as well admit there's a strong attraction between us."

"Yes," she replied and gained full authority over the glass of champagne. "I'll admit I'm attracted to you, but I'm not sure why?"

"I'll discuss this with you later, Darling." He leaned over and kissed her subtly on the lips. "Right now I see customers that need humoring." Jesse confidently drifted back into the midst of the crowd. Rachel shook her head and began helping cut the cake to distribute on paper plates.

As she placed a slice on a plate a hand reached to take it. "My, my don't you look like the prize filly at a showing," a deep voice said.

She glanced up into a pair of familiar brown eyes. "Drew—"

"Like I said you've captured the eye of every man in this room tonight." He selected a fork from the lot on the table and began eating the cake.

"I doubt that," she replied pertly returning attention to the task of cutting cake.

"Now wait a minute." Drew caught hold of the knife in her hand. "You're challenging my eye for beauty again. I tell you Bitterroot will be a champion—no—I try to pay a compliment—no—"

"Drew—what are you doing here?" she asked thinking he had shown up uninvited.

"Louanna invited Bill who told me to come along and take advantage of the opportunity to acquaint myself with the folks in the area. Think your friends will mind?" he asked out of what seemed genuine concern.

"I'll mind if you start another fight," Rachel warned.

"I didn't come here to fight." He glanced about the room studiously then returned his gaze to her face. "Care to dance?"

"Is the band playing?" Rachel had for a moment lost track of all activity beyond him.

"I hear music," he said putting the half eaten piece of cake down on the table.

"I guess I would like to dance then," she said laying down the knife. Rachel conspicuously glanced over the shoulder to see that Jesse Ryan was heavily engaged in conversation with several ranchers. Yet, feeling uneasy, she stepped out through the sliding glass door into the crisp night air. Flood lights that shone on the bandstand and wooden dance floor blocked stars in the sky from view. Drew took a firm hold of her hand with his own calloused by ranch duties. They glided into the two-step among the other couples dancing. "Relax," he drew her in closer. Rachel closed her eyes. Drifting in the arms of a gentle spirit beneath the tough exterior of a rodeo cowboy, she was captivated by a force stronger than her own self will.

"Swing your partner round and round." A caller stepped up to the bandstand to introduce the tempo of the western swing. Next thing Rachel knew Drew had her docey-doeing and bowing to the other couples that completed the foursome of the square dance routine. Dips and swings and around the ring, "one more turn and home you go--promenade," sang the caller. His voice carried from the megaphone to echo off the

distant mountain sides. They danced and danced an hour that seemed a moment suspended in time. Tempo changed to low gear and Rachel, having been swung from partner to partner, found comfort in the arms of Drew MacLeod once again. Tenderly his fingers caressed her hand. She glanced up, into an unexpectedly agitated face. "Drew? Something wrong?" she asked, suddenly taken aback.

"No—" He tried denying the obvious as they glided across the floor, his eyes never lifting their gaze from her face, the gaze of a man treasuring the moment yet agonizing over that which had gone unspoken. His chest swelled with an uneasy breath, his fingers trembled. "Rachel, I need to talk to you, alone."

"We are alone," she said in a futile attempt to recapture the vanishing enchantment.

"Come here—" In the middle of a song Drew walked off the dancefloor. Baffled and slightly put out, Rachel followed him to a remote edge of the activity. He was seeking solace out of the floodlights, standing his back to the crowd and staring up at the big sky. Rachel sensed it was the ranch that was on his mind. "You're buying the ranch, aren't you?" She folded her arms and stood silently daring him to speak the truth of the matter and not really wanting to hear it. This night was meant for dancing and laughing not crying the tears that were choking up in her throat.

Drew turned and faced her. "I didn't mean for you to find out second hand," he said apologetically. "You must understand, I needed to wait until I was sure of securing a loan before speaking to you—"

"Funny," she forced a laugh to combat the swelling of tears to no avail. "For some strange reason I didn't want to believe it when

Louanna told me."

"Rachel—" Drew stretched out a hand to banish the anguish that showed on her face. "I expected you to be happy that I was the one buying the ranch instead of some one with no respect for the place."

"Respect? What do you know about respect? I've been working hard to show my mother that I deserve to inherit the ranch. But, I guess you wouldn't understand that—would you?" As she side stepped the grasp of his hand her boot heel fell into a dip in the ground. In quick reflex, his muscular arms caught her in a firm hold. Rachel lay staring at the man with passion swelling in her breast. "Let me go," she demanded to regain balance on a twisted ankle.

"Listen—" The warmth of his brown eyes was replaced by an anger that she dared not provoke any further. "Zelda isn't about to give the ranch over to you and if I don't buy the place the likes of Jesse Ryan may and turn that forest into a wasteland. Is that what you want?"

"Leave Jesse out of it, Drew MacLeod—I thought you were some one who I could trust—" She started choking on tears that accompanied the loud denouncement of their friendship.

"My God, you're really upset." His hand brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"Let me go, damn it—I'm not some sort of possession you can do as you please with." She struggled toward freedom. "I'm a person, Drew MacLeod. You cannot buy me by buying the ranch." The accusation hit the cowboy like a slap in the face. The hands that held her dropped limply. Rachel turned away humiliated. Another hand gripped her forearm. She glanced up, her mind in a jumble of confusion, and met the pair of deep blue eyes that once had intrigued her. She wanted to fall

into his arms right then and there, wanted him to shelter her.

"MacLeod—" Jesse said in a stern voice. "Where's your invitation?"

"Come on, Ryan," Drew chuckled to the sky. "This is an open house."

"Hey, you were not invited—so leave—" he demanded.

"Okay, okay." With his hands raised surrenderingly, Drew retreated into the dark of night and disappeared behind the bandstand. Rachel stood watching him go, wishing the truth weren't so. "Hey—" Jesse's forefinger wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Excuse me, Jesse, I—I need to be alone for a few minutes," she murmured and started to walk on.

"Rachel—" He caught her by the arm a second time. "You keep disappearing on me...I thought we came here to dance?"

"We did—" A smile crept across her face when at last she remembered that they were together tonight. It was a fleeting smile nonetheless. "I'll be right back."

"Promise?" He refused to take no for an answer.

She nodded then retreated into the house that had emptied as the party drifted outside to enjoy the festivities. In the bathroom she washed away the tears and ran a brush through tangled hair. Over and over the scene played like a motion picture through her head. Was it love? Was it hate? Nothing made sense. Rachel chased Drew from thought and resolved to go back to Jesse, to have that dance and forget the rest. The reflection staring back from inside the mirror looked less convinced. She turned off the light and proceeded back into the crowd.

The air held the scent of freshly mown grass and the sound of

laughter and music. She scanned the circles milling about and found Jesse making a way toward her with a bottle of champagne tucked under an arm. "Whatever that cowboy had to say it certainly upset you," he remarked while popping the cork off the champagne bottle. The plastic cap went sailing high into the air and landed with a thud on the floor of the balcony above their heads where earlier Jesse had insisted on escorting her. It was such a beautiful house, a rightful cause to celebrate. She took the glass of champagne from his outstretched hand, sipped the bubbly that ticked her nose, and drew a few deep breaths that helped restore a sense of composure. "Jesse, I wish we had gotten to know each other better. I mean you spent practically every waking minute of the summer on building and now plan to rush off to California to check on the harvest." Her forefinger traced the rim of the plastic champagne glass. "We never even had a chance to go riding together."

"Horses, darling, are not my idea of fun." He made the remark casually.

"So that's why you avoided me all summer. Terrified of having to spend an afternoon on horseback," she half-teased.

"Have I been avoiding you?" he pondered the statement.

"Yes, you have." She glanced awkwardly about the party while the music played and the dancers danced. "Jesse, will you please take me home?"

The highway leading homeward appeared foreign to her eyes, though she traveled it often. And the ridged mountain peaks silhouetted against the deep blue sky on this a moonlit night stood forlorn in the distance. More frightening was the lodge no longer welcoming but rather existing aloofly midst a grove of tall pine trees. Rachel readily

climbed out of the jeep when Jesse brought it to a halt in the parking lot. She stood gazing at the eminent white structure. It would never be the same with some one else's name hanging from the porch roof. A swell of tears sent her walking toward the side stoop. Her hand trembled on the brass knob, wondering how many more times it would have the privilege of turning it. On the threshold of the flat she paused.

"Do you always cut out on dates?" Jesse leaned an elbow against the door frame.

"No—" she replied, forthright.

"I wouldn't know—" he said, arrogantly awaiting an explanation.

"Oh, Jesse," Rachel sighed helplessly. "I didn't intend to ruin the evening for you, after your working so hard on the house, you deserve better."

"Forget the party. It wasn't that important. What is important is you and me." He ran a hand across her cheek to wipe away a tear. "Are you going to ask me in or is this good-bye?"

"No—" she replied sniffing. "Stay for awhile," and took his hand to welcome him into the kitchen. "Would you like some wine?" She inquired clumsily like a novice.

"I never turn down the offer," Jesse said.

Rachel blushed recalling that day in June when she had purchased the bottle of Ryan wine with the intent of their sharing it on a picnic far into the wilderness where they would have ridden on horseback in the late afternoon sunshine. "I take you at your word that this is the best—" She brought the bottle down from a cupboard and showed him the label.

"Darling, don't ever settle for less," he remarked while rummaging

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through a drawer for a cork screw. Rachel looked fondly on the skillful hands that removed the cork effortlessly and poured the wine into two glasses. "To excellance," he toasted.

"To excellance," she chimed.

The room fell silent and still as if deserted. The pressure of her hands around the glass holding a deep burgandy wine increased. Jesse reached for the bottle and studied its label. "The Chateau St. Johanna—I'm going there tomorrow morning, you're welcome to come along if you like." He put it back down on the counter.

The pictured land of hill top castles and flourishing vineyards below captured her curiosity. "I've never been to California."

Jesse laughed. "I think there are many places in this world where you have never been, Darling."

"You're beginning to sound like my mother," Rachel commented under her breath.

"Ah, yes, that sweet little woman who made sure we had everything while staying at the lodge, I remember," he replied. "She travels?"

"Yes, she was born and raised in Boston before marrying my father, used to spend each summer touring a different section of Europe. Love's the only thing that could keep her here."

"And what is it that keeps you here?" he asked.

"Roots." Suddenly Rachel noticed that he was staring. "I know every part of this territory, it's pleasures and it's dangers...I suppose the forest is not as interesting to some as say the hilly streets of San Fransisco by cablecar, but it's where I belong."

"If you've never been to San Fransisco by cablecar you must come and see for yourself which is the more interesting," he insisted.

"Tomorrow morning we'll go. The plane leaves Great Falls at eight forty-five."

Rachel, unaccustomed to drinking the amount of wine she had consumed over the course of the evening began to feel a slight headache. She put the glass down on the counter. "If I'm going to California tomorrow I guess I'd better say good-night and get packed and off to bed."

"Don't say good-night." Jesse took her in his arms and kissed her diligently.

"Jesse—"

"I want to stay with you," he told her.

"No—not tonight."

"You've changed your mind then about going?" he questioned.

"No—I want to go—but you need to understand the terms—"

Looking disappointed Jesse released her. "I'll be around to fetch you at six-thirty." Rachel walked him to the door and sent him back out into the chilly night air and wondered if perhaps she was too old fashioned to suit him.

IX

Rows of flourishing grapevines whizzed by the window of the black limousine. The valley of rippling hills was alive with harvesting activity. Pickers pursued the vineyards. Gondolas lined the dirt paths. Tourists crowded the thoroughfare to get a glimpse of what went into the making of the new crush. The auto slowed to turn onto a narrowly paved road cutting through the vineyards and ascended a hill upon which a single-storied house spanned an acre of land. The driver brought the limousine to a smooth halt in the driveway encircling a colorful bed of flowers. "Welcome to the Chateau St. Johanna," Jesse exclaimed from a seat beside her on the plush velvet and moved to get out. While the driver unloaded luggage, Jesse came around to open the door for her. Rachel took hold of his hand and stepped from cool filtered air into the California heat intensifying the fragrance of flowers. "The estate is named after my mother, Johanna."

"Lucky woman." Rachel marveled at the sight more attractive than its label replica.

"I always saw my father as the lucky one," Jesse replied and went to pay the driver for his trouble. As the limousine pulled around the circle drive Jesse took the suitcase and started toward the arched entranceway. Rachel followed along into an elegant hall from which proceeded a corridor leading to the bedrooms. "For your very own." He paused on the threshold of a rose-colored bedroom.

Rachel, appreciating the privacy, entered and glanced about wide-eyed at the show of wealth. She walked over to the pictured window

framing a view of the winery in the near distance. "May I have a tour?" she inquired as two men climbed out of a truck pulling a gondola full of grapes to be pressed.

"I imagine one could be arranged." With that Jesse took her by the hand and led her through the entire house, starting with the master bedroom and ending with the kitchen equipped for the hosting of formal dinner parties. "Are you hungry?" In the refrigerator he found the shelves empty except for several bottles of mineral water. "I'm afraid I spoke too soon—some water?" He went about getting the glasses and filling them. "There you are, Darling, one tall, cold glass of mineral water." Rachel, unaccustomed to drinking bottled water, took the glass warily from his hand. "It's perfectly safe to drink," he assured her.

"And tap water isn't?"

"California is not Montana."

She suddenly felt displaced from the ranch and its streams flowing abundantly with clear water. Jesse, noticing the far away expression, put his arm around her and directed their footsteps to the backyard patio. They went to sit at an umbrella covered table overlooking the family estate from a well kept lawn that gently sloped the sides of the hill upon which the Chateau St. Johanna reigned. "The Ryan vineyards extend as far as the eye can see," he commented arrogantly proud in his seat upon the hill.

"How about the rest of that tour?" Rachel finished drinking the last drop of water in the bottom of the glass.

"Ah, Rachel, you are persistent," he retorted ineffectually.

"You noticed," she replied with no intention of sitting statuesquely on the hill top the entire day.

Jesse stood hesitantly and side by side they sauntered down the hill into the vineyards. "I learned as a child that viticulture is very temperamental." Jesse kicked up a stir of dirt along the gondola path. "Every decision made, every minute spent especially during harvest shows itself in the wine. More often than not, the determining factor is some uncontrollable thing like the weather—" He returned the wave of a picker toiling over a vine for its grapes. Another sun-drenched man came by toting a full tub of grapes and greeted them with a smile. His teeth shown white like pearls under a bushy mustache. "Mr. Ryan, welcome home." Jesse nodded and followed the picker over to the gondola where the grapes were heaped for transport to the press. "When did harvesting start?" he asked while closely examining the fruit.

"Ten days ago," the picker replied wincing up at the azure sky. "Weather no good. This morning no fog. Clear skies all day. I fear grapes ripen faster than picker can pick," he shrugged his shoulders at the prediction.

"How serious is the problem?" Jesse dropped the cluster of grapes back onto the heap.

"Serious problem, si. Workers no want extra hours—need pay double—" He rubbed his fingers together and walked back into the vineyards to refill the tub with grapes.

"Darling, would you mind asking the tour guide at the winery to show you around the rest of the estate." With that request Jesse abruptly dismissed her from his company. "I'll see you at dinner." Rachel stood stunned as him walk down the path. His stride was wide with a sense of urgency about it. She shrugged helplessly losing interest in taking a tour of the winery and sighingly glanced around at

the unfamiliar surroundings. Finally she decided to make the most of the afternoon by taking a walk into the village they had passed on the way to the Chateau.

It was about a two mile walk in the heat of the afternoon to the village that comprised a country inn, deli shop, and several boutiques. Rachel was unaccustomed to the intense rays and quickly ducked under the roof along the boardwalk. She browsed leisurely from shop to shop, bought a wide-brimmed straw hat at one, and found a dress at another. The dress in a green dotted Swiss fabric had delicate Irish lace outlining a low neckline. She had been back to look it over twice and finally took the garment into the dressing room and put it on. She glanced at the reflection in the mirror as though it was a stranger staring back. The dress fit. "I'll take it," she told the storeclerk and proceeded to make the purchase. Determined to capture Jesse's undivided attention at dinner, she walked out of the boutique with another package in hand.

Next, the question of a menu needed answering. She stopped by a deli to inquire of California's cuisine. The merchant recommended fresh crab meat with a salad, sour dough bread with seasoned cheese spread, and a bottle of wine. Rachel declined the wine but bought the rest and gathered the packaged food into her arms.

The front door of the Chateau St. Johanna opened before she reached the arched entranceway. A young Mexican girl stood guarding the threshold. "You must be Anita," Rachel guessed from Jesse's description of the housekeeper and extended a handshake. "I'm Rachel—" she awkwardly stepped through the entranceway into the front hall.

"Si, Senora, Jesse tell me to come and make dinner for two—tonight

some candle light?" She giggled the way sixteen year olds do.

"Oh, no need," Rachel said. "I stopped by the deli and bought some crab for dinner—"

"I cook steak." The girl's ebony eyes flashed warily back.

Rachel reluctantly surrendered authority in the matter. There was no use fighting about it. And after the exhausting walk she did not have the energy to sustain a squabble. She passively handed over the deli food to Anita and retreated to the privacy of the rose-colored bedroom for a nap. Having stripped the blankets off the bed she climbed between cool sheets and collapsed into a meditative state.

An alarming notion jolted her from rest. Rachel shot straight up on the bed and clutched the sheet to her bosom. She stared about at the unfamiliar surroundings and remembered where she was. The drapes had been drawn to block the strong sun. She glanced anxiously at the illuminated dial of the clock on the stand. It read five thrity-one. She lay back down and stared up at the ceiling and wondered how the men were getting along at the ranch without her. She had called the bunkhouse last night and surprised Bill with news of her leaving. She did not want to think any more of it and left the comfortable bed behind for a shower before donning the new dress.

On the way through the diningroom she noticed that the long diningtable had already been set at one end with china for two and a tall candelabra. The decor though lacked a certain something. Flowers perhaps. Rachel went into the kitchen to get a paring knife and asked Anita for a vase. The girl frowned when she learned that Rachel intended to cut a bouquet from the assortment of flowers growing in the garden. Such formalities! Rachel paid no heed and went outside and

proceeded to cut an array of flowers to make-up a colorful bouquet. She took care arranging each stem so that its petals meshed perfectly with the next before placing the vase of flowers on the table then stepped back to admire the vivid colors and fragrant perfume. The fresh scent reminded her of the mountain meadows that bloomed each summer in Montana.

"There you are, Darling." Jesse came in carrying a wine bottle. "Found this gem in the cellar. Cabernat, vintage year 1950."

"And I found these in the front garden," Rachel showed off the bouquet. "Jesse— aren't they beautiful?" she asked seeking his approval.

"Had I known you wanted flowers badly enough to butcher the front garden, I would have called the florist," he clipped in a manner that warned against doing it again. Anita who was busy serving the food giggled underbreath. Without further comment Jesse pulled out a chair and seated Rachel at the table. He uncorked the bottle of Cabernat and poured a taste into a crystal goblet and tested it. Finding the wine suitable, he filled both goblets to the rim, lit the candles, and sat down to look across the table at her. Their glances mingled in the flickering light. "Green becomes you, Rachel."

"Thank you," she cast her eyes down to the dress. "I wasn't thinking to pack anything fancy when we left Montana." The truth of the matter was she discovered upon arrival at the Chateau St. Johanna that her wardrobe simply would not do. She lifted the wine to her lips and drank. "So I walked into the village this afternoon and bought it at one of the boutiques."

"Darling, if you had gone to the winery like I told you to do you

would have learned to enjoy wine's full flavor, observe." Jesse took some of the fermented juice into his mouth and gurgled it.

"It's a bit noisy, wouldn't you say?" She laughed through the painful discovery that he did not care to hear about exploring the village.

"So it is. Now close your ears and listen to your tastebuds," he insisted. Rachel drew a deep breath and supposed elegance. She lifted the goblet to her lips and wetted her tongue with wine, allowing it to tickle the tastebuds in imitation of the vintager's wine tasting technique. "That's better." He started heaping food onto a china plate in front of him then passed the dishes.

"Jesse, what happened in the vineyard that got you so upset?" She took a small portion of each food.

"If you must know, the entire vintage is in danger of spoiling," he flatly replied.

"Isn't there anything you can do about it?" she persisted boldly when nothing but silence accompanied the meal.

"Rachel." Jesse dropped his fork. "I would like it very much if you did not concern yourself with such matters."

"I'm simply curious," she said, offended by his lack of sharing and resolved not to bother any more with the questions.

In an uncomfortable silence they finished the meal. Jesse relaxed against the high-backed chair. His dark eyes studied the smooth contours of her face. "Tell me what you think about the world beyond the Sterling ranch?"

"I haven't seen enough to form a sound opinion," she said unmoved to try again.

"Perhaps we should take this up in a more congenial atmosphere." Jesse blew out the candles that flickered his tall shadow on the far wall and showed the way into the den. Shelves of leather bound books and an odd collection of antiques were mixed among contemporary furnishings. "You like Mozart of course?"

"Of course." She recalled hearing the name dropped somewhere in the past.

The composer's soaring melodies suddenly filled the air and Jesse held her captive in his arms once more. "About that dance you owe me." Rachel closed her eyes. Her thoughts were instantly stolen by the memory of dancing in the arms of Drew MacLeod under the big sky of Montana. Montana where the day was at its end on the ranch. She tried to return the affection of the man holding her. To no avail. "Jesse, something came up at the housewarming last night that I think you should know about."

"Darling, it's been a long day." He sighingly reached to pull her onto the couch beside the table where they stood.

"Listen to me for once—" It came as a desperate plea as she left him sitting there and traversed the oriental rug. Her eyes scanned the titles of books stacked along the wall, searching for the courage and the words to explain. Coming to the Chateau St. Johanna had been a mistake. "Last night when you found me outside with Drew MacLeod we were in the middle of a fight. He told me about his plans to buy the ranch and I freaked. I couldn't accept it, I still don't. The ranch belongs to Sterlings. There must be something I can do? A law somewhere, I don't know. Anyway, when you asked me to come to California I was desperate—needed time to think...what I'm trying to

say is—is that I came here for the wrong reasons—" Relieved to be confessed Rachel turned around to face him. On the couch slouched a man whose eyes had drooped shut and whose mouth hung open snoring. She stood gaping as his apparent charm had met its bounds and wondered why he extended her the invitation to visit in the first place. Rachel, under the duress of circumstance, resolved to bother him no more about her private concerns and retreated to the bedroom for a night's rest.

The aroma of coffee brewing and baked cinnamon was adrift in the air when Rachel traversed the diningroom the next morning. In the kitchen she found the housekeeper busily preparing a breakfast meal of bacon and eggs, pancakes and homemade sweet rolls. "Have you seen Jesse this morning, Anita?" She had tossed and turned all night and finally reached the conclusion that whatever the day was to bring it would do no good for her to act hastily on yesterday's impression about the true nature of Jesse Ryan.

"He reading newspaper on patio. Wants you to join him," the young girl replied while scurrying about to fix a tray with coffee and freshly baked rolls for two.

"I'll take that," Rachel insisted and went her way with the tray to the outdoor patio. "Good morning, Jesse," she sang to him seated behind the day's edition of the San Francisco Chronicle.

"Morning, Darling." He folded the paper down and casted an inquisitive glance her way before reaching to butter a hot sweet roll. "I trust you are feeling better this morning."

"Yes, thank you," she murmured and took a seat.

"Good, because I have planned the day. A little breakfast to start us off then we'll drive into the City...perhaps take a cable car down to Fishermen's Wharf and have lunch at a little French place I know of... also you may want to do some shopping for the dinner party this evening...just a little affair I'm throwing to show you off to some of my friends," he clipped along at a fast rate and with such enthusiasm. "Shall we go?"

"It sounds like fun--" She was caught off-guard by his renewed interest.

"Then it's settled."

Touring the City with Jesse Ryan proved to be a delightful experience. They came home to the Chateau St. Johanna exhausted and laughing and bearing a new wardrobe. Rachel retreated to the rose-colored bedroom. Jesse summoned Anita to help her dress for the occasion of a dinner party. The girl's brown hands were skilled at the task. With precision she nipped and tucked silk fabric around Rachel's feminine figure. Sparkling blue eyes were the only feature of the mirror image Rachel recognized. She studied the face painted for subtle light, the dress that revealed where it covered and the swirl of blond hair atop the head. It brought back memories of senior class prom night and how Zelda had taken her daughter and Louanna to Denver on a shopping spree a month prior to the occasion. Giggles had filled the dressing room that night with anticipation and speculation over the future.

A loud knock at the bedroom door alerted her. Rachel hurried to answer it on a pair of heels that lacked the substance her dancing boots offered in a pivouette. Jesse's tall figure dressed in black and white

filled the door frame. His deep blue eyes leisurely took in the details of the transformed woman standing before him. "Well, well, Miss Rachel Sterling." He extended an escorting arm upon which her grip grew with each step along the hall. "Relax and smile," he whispered the last instructions and they turned the corner to entered the spacious diningroom.

Three gentlemen, also dressed in black and white, arose from their seats at the table. Their wives' painted faces instantly hushed their conversaton. Rachel drew an uneasy breath and let go of Jesse's arm in an effort at claiming some independance. Nonetheless he proceeded to parade her around the table to meet one by one the guests. There was Nora and Charles Schwell, a middle-aged couple who owned a neighboring winery. She was struck by their gaiety at a time when the grapes were spoiling on the vine. But, then, Jesse had not mentioned the vineyards all day. On the other side of the table were seated Lydia and Robert Hampel, a couple from the City. Lydia was young and had the chic look of a model, he an established architect wore greying temples. George Blain was a business executive with Ruth his wife. Rachel sat self-consciously in the guest of honor's seat at one end of the table while Jesse took a seat at the opposite end.

"Are you familiar with the opera?" Ruth began the inquiry from a seat halfway the length of the table.

"No." Rachel answered.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear. You really must get Jesse to take you to LA BOHEME...it is a delightful little piece...My guild is trying desperately to revive the popular interest..."

"Really, Ruth," Nora protested. "Rachel would be bored with the

opera."

"Well, I thought it only polite to ask. One never knows unless one asks—" she adamantly defended her purpose.

"No one in Montana cares the slightest about the art. Besides, you know how Jesse hates going to theatre." Nora leaned forth to speak confidentially. "Judy, the poor dear, had an avid interest in drama, started acting bit parts as a hobby. Of course Jesse didn't approve. It was bad publicity for the wife of a vintager to be cohorting about dingy stages with unknown actors."

"Jesse is married?"

"Was, dear, was." Nora smiled reassuringly.

"I see." Rachel reached for the glass of wine in front of her on the table dressed with delicate Irish lace, china, and crystal. The fermented juice glided over her deadened tastebuds as she stared down the table.

"To us!" Jesse caught her eye and toasted from the other end. Every one joined in.

Dialogue rambled in a biassed fashion through a seven course dinner. Two and a half hours Rachel endured the questioning and critical glances of the others who had come purely out of curiosity to see the creature Jesse had brought back from the northern wilds. When the last Mercedes disappeared down the hill she turned to him standing in the front entranceway. "How dare you put me on display like that."

"Why, Darling, I thought you handled them quit eloquently." His cold hands were caressing her bare shoulders.

"Don't touch me." She firmly brushed them aside. He laughed in a drunken stupor and fell forward to kiss her with the urgency of an

unfulfilled need. "Stop it, Jesse." Rachel wiggled free of his grasp and held him upright at arm's length. "You've had too much to drink—"

"While there're grapes growing on the vine we shall pick them to make our wine," he exclaimed.

Frustrated by his indifference Rachel glanced out the door at the bed of fragrant flowers sleeping in the moonlight. The future held no promise for her here. "Jesse—I'm leaving."

"Leaving?" He instantly became sober if only for a moment. "Why, darling? Is it something I did? Something I said? What?" he demanded with an impatient grimace.

"For one thing you never told me about your wife."

"My wife? Rachel—" A deep furrow knit across his forehead. "I don't have any wife."

"Her name is Judy."

"Ah, Judy, the stage goddess. What did you want to know about her?" he asked.

"I would like to have known that she exists," Rachel said, dumbfounded by the lack of regard he held for such information.

"Well, the ladies certainly took care of that," he dismissed the matter as irrelevant to the moment.

"Yes, I should thank them for saving me the trouble of making the similar mistake of falling for that act you put on—you don't care about me, Jesse Ryan. All you care about is having a successful image." She left him there guard the entranceway of the Chateau St. Johanna.

In the rose-colored bedroom Rachel clutched the telephone receiver and waited impatiently for the reservations clerk to confirm a flight to Great Falls. To her dismay the next one was not scheduled to leave

until nine forty in the morning. She booked herself on it and began to change out of the clothes that made a stranger of her reflection in the mirror. A disturbance in the hall preceded Jesse's barging into the bedroom. "Would you please leave—" she failed to command him.

As if deaf, the man stumbled over to the bed where a suitcase lay opened for packing. "This used to be my room when I was growing up—they painted it pink after I left..." he stretched his tall body the length of the mattress and propped a pillow upon which to rest his head. "Pink is such an obtrusive color for walls, don't you agree?"

"I like it frankly." Rachel pulled on a robe and continued packing the rest of her belongings.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Seriously," he added with a smirk. "Running back home to that cowboy who bought your birthright?"

Rachel paused at the bedside. "I asked you to leave."

"I've been listening to your body talk all evening, Darling. You don't want me to leave anymore than you want to go back to Montana." Gasping her arm Jesse tried pulling her onto the bed. But Rachel with a greater command of reflex readily escaped him.

"Get out—" she persisted boldly with a clenched fist.

Jesse sat up on the edge of the bed. "What is it with you? A crime to go on living after divorce?"

"What you do is your own business," Rachel murmured ashamed of herself for staying another day to wallow in his beguiling ways.

She managed to get him to leave and throughout the night lay on her side waiting for dawn to break. The restless hours crept by. Morning

did come. She arose and instantly dreaded having to face the day. Splashes of cold water and a pinch to the cheeks for color hardly helped to alleviate a gloomy outlook. She went about dressing for the plane flight and stewing over whether or not to disturb Jesse for a ride to the airport. Undecided on the matter, she went to get something to still her growling stomach. She was thankful to find the kitchen empty. Anita had not yet arrived to dominate the premises. She fished around for the coffee-maker and started a pot brewing.

"I could use a cup." Jesse's voice carried above the perking. He staggered over to the small oval table and plopped his aching body down.

"I'm surprised to see you awake," Rachel replied while pouring two cups. She went to serve him one. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to ask for a ride to the airport or not--"

"Why are we going to the airport, Darling?" His memory failed to recall.

"My plane leaves for Great Falls at nine forty...I told you last night that I was leaving."

"What is it you want from me?" he demanded with a piercing glare.

"A ride to the airport or should I call a taxi?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Jesse checked his watch for the time.

"You've ten minutes to get your things together and out to the car in the driveway."

Without further ado Rachel went to get the luggage and take it out to the red Carrea parked in the circle driveway of the Chateau St. Johanna. Its engine idled as she put the suitcase in the rear and climbed onto the front bucket seat beside Jesse Ryan sitting stone-faced behind the steering wheel.

He put the car in gear and drove down the hill into the valley. They passed by the winery at the end of the road. The sweet scent of fermenting grapes was adrift in the air. The auto pulled onto a two-lane thoroughfare. Once clear of the village limits Jesse pressed the gas pedal to the floor. They sped through patches of light fog that had crept over the rippling hills from the ocean beyond and nestled overnight into the lowlands. "Must you drive so fast?" Rachel asked frightened by the poor visibility in the fog.

"I would hate for you to miss that plane," he clipped.

"Considering the next one doesn't leave for twenty-four hours, so would I." She crossed her arms and blinked back the swell of tears.

Jesse's hand found her knee. The warmth of his caressing palm burned through the thickness of the jean material to her skin. On impulse she pulled away. "To be honest with you, Darling, I don't understand why you are leaving."

"That doesn't surprise me any." She averted her gaze out the window. Soon the Golden Gate bridge came into view, then the City by the Bay rising out of the thick salt air.

When the Carree stopped in front of the airport terminal Jesse got hold of the suitcase in the rear seat before she had a hand on it. He went around to talk to one of the porters and slipped the man some money for taking charge of the luggage. "Listen—" Beside him on the sidewalk Rachel fumbled through her purse for the check book. "I want to repay you the amount of the plane fare."

"Keep your money, you may need it." Jesse reached for her arm and started into the terminal.

"No—" She scribbled out a check. "Here—" and put it to him.

"Good-bye, Jesse."

"Rachel--" His hand brushed against her forearm in an attempt to persuade her to stay.

She took several confident steps forward then half-turned with a glance over the shoulder, and caught a glimpse of him striding away.

X

One glance at the roadsign announcing the Sterling ranch turnoff and Rachel kept the wheels of the rented jeep along the two-lane highway. Jesse had been right about one thing. She did not want to go home and face Drew MacLeod. Her thoughts were too jumbled, her disgust too great over his attempt to gain control of the ranch, and there was little with which she had to fight. Her unsteady hand steered along the narrowly winding mountain road until the neon sign atop the Melody Rose dancehall came into view. It was lit in the late afternoon grey. Red and green said welcome. She pulled the jeep into the dirt clearing and parked.

Rachel climbed out of the vehicle and paused to revel in the thin crisp air that filled her lungs and the forest offering serenity. Little changed in the wilderness, paradise Jake called it. She set her sights toward tomorrow and a long ride on horseback, and walked into the dancehall.

Louanna was perched on a stool behind the bar. Her green eyes stared dreamily into a room void of customers. Her right hand tapped rhythmically on the counter to the beat of music playing from the corner jukebox. Rachel cleared her throat before taking another step inside. Lazily Louanna glanced toward the door. On a double take she sprang to her feet. "Rachel! What are you doing here? I thought you went to California with Jesse—"

"I came back." She shrugged walking over to the bar counter and took a seat opposite her friend.

"What happened?" Louanna demanded details.

"I discovered that we weren't really suited to each other," Rachel explained.

"Mind telling me what is going on? One day you are not even talking to Jesse Ryan and the next you are flying off to California with him." Louanna shook her head.

"Jesse is one of those men who has everything, a Chateau, a successful wine industry—"

"Good looks and charm," Louanna pointed out needlessly.

Rachel shrugged. "Drew found me at the housewarming...we went out to dance and were having a great time. Then suddenly he tells me he is buying the ranch, like he was taking everything away and there stood Jesse—"

"Offering everything."

"But—everything isn't anything without love...funny, Jesse was holding me in his arms the other night and all I could think about was Drew and the ranch and how much I missed it—"

"How could you think about Drew MacLeod after what he did?" Louanna asked earnestly.

"It's Zelda's doing," Rachel surmised. "I should have seen that my going to California with Jesse Ryan was in her plans all along."

"Zelda didn't pack your suitcase," Louanna pointed out.

"No—" Rachel conceded. "I guess she didn't."

"Want a hamburger?" Louanna reached out a hand to tap Rachel's numbed forearm.

"No thanks." She sighed. "I better just go home while I still have one." She got up to leave and out of the corner of her eye caught

sight of the diamond ring on her friend's left hand. "Jake gave you a ring?"

"Hey, I didn't want to sound boastful when you were so down. He gave it to me at the party." She sat admiring the precious stone. "I guess all that fussing paid off..." She flung her arms up in the air, a carefree gesture filled with joy. "Want to be my maid-of-honor?"

"Yes I want to—" Rachel leaned over the wooden bar counter and gave her friend a hug. "I'm glad at least one of us found what we've been looking for."

"Don't ever stop," Louanna offered the advice as a couple of cowboys came strutting through the door of the dancehall. "You want that hamburger now?"

"No." Rachel gathered the jeep keys from her rear jeans' pocket and started walking toward the door.

"Keep those eyes open, you hear," Louanna shouted after her.

"They're open," Rachel assured her and smiled at the cowboy to her side tipping his hat adieu. The other one sprang forth to hold the door ajar. She thanked him kindly on the way out.

The fresh mountain air held the chill of autumn. Summer had vanished. As she drove Rachel thought about those bygone days. Memories of Drew filled each one. He had been there for her, it seemed, when no one else cared. Confused, she turned the jeep onto the narrow dirt road leading to the lodge. Its headlights bounced off the forest trees along the bumpy road and shone the way around the bend. Headlight to headlight the jeep and a flatbed truck came. It was Drew and Bill going to fetch the last load of hay for the day and take it to storage in the stables. Absentmindedly Rachel pressed the brake to the floor

yet failed to pull the jeep aside. Drew climbed down from the cab. She put the jeep in park, letting it idle, and went to meet the cowboy half way. Under the stetson hat and bushy brown eyebrows his brown eyes looked forlorn. "Fancy meeting you here," he said in a manner that hid the gentle spirit she had once detected beneath that tough exterior of a rodeo cowboy used to desensitizing pain.

"This is my ranch, Drew," Rachel replied sounding austere.

"Aye, until tomorrow," he pointed out. "Zelda and Bert are due in around noon to close the sale."

"Stop it, Drew." Rachel had had enough of such talk. "You're not buying the ranch, I won't let you—"

"Won't you now?"

"No, I won't."

"Is that why you went to California? To secure a loan from Ryan?"

"No—I went to California because—because—it's none of your business." She caught a glimpse of a smile breaking the stern expression of a man not about to abandon the struggle for control. He never doubted a decision, this much she knew about him, this much she admired. "Mind moving the jeep along?" He half commanded and went to climb back into the cab of the flatbed truck.

That the request had become a command bothered Rachel putting the jeep in gear. She proceeded to pull it aside to let the truck pass then drove on to the empty parking lot. The horses grazing leisurely in the distant pasture and the men toiling in the field were the only signs of life. She toted the luggage into the private flat and reached for the telephone. To her dismay Zelda was out for the evening. Upstairs in the bedroom she plopped the suitcase onto the bed and sprang the clasp.

The two sides fell apart. The green dress from the boutique in the village and the rose-colored silk gown from San Francisco lay on top of the wardrobe of jeans and cotton blouses she had packed to go south. Wishing she had left the dresses at the Chateau where they belonged Rachel went about hanging them in the rear of the closet. When finished she tried calling Zelda again. "Mother?" The familiar voice came over the wire.

"Rachel, I'm so happy to hear from you. And how is our Jesse Ryan? You're there with him in California, I hear."

"Mother, I'm not in California, I'm at the ranch in Montana. I called to tell you that I know Drew's planning to buy the place and I don't like it."

"Dear, we all have our choices to make. Your visiting the Ryan estate was certainly that."

"Wrong, Mother, it was the wrong choice."

"Rachel, Rachel." Zelda sighed audibly into the receiver. "What does Drew think about your little escapade to California?"

"It doesn't matter what Drew MacLeod thinks—"

"You simply don't understand, do you?"

"No, Mother, I guess I really don't."

"You cannot have it both ways, Dear...If you aren't prepared to leave the ranch then you will have to content with your Mr. MacLeod—"

"But the ranch rightfully belongs to me—not him—"

"Listen—this hardly is a topic for telephone conversation.

Rachel, we'll talk tomorrow."

XI

Dressed in a flannel gown, Rachel went to the window of her bedroom and lifted an edge of the lace curtains. Large flakes of snow were adrift in the air. A thin layer of white hid the fading greenery below. She opened the window and checked the temperature finding it mild enough to melt the frozen moisture. Secure with the knowledge that a blizzard was unlikely to occur from the clouds rumbling over the mountains, she donned a layer of woollens, jeans and riding chaps, put on a coat, and darted outside. Her footprints left a trail of green across the snowy lawn to the stables.

First thing she went around to visit each of the five foals. It had been a long four day separation. The reunion reestablished her trainer's bond with the animals that were not to be neglected if awards were to come their way. Any notion of further abandoning these she readily rejected, for the foals were the first generation of Sterling quarter horses legally registered under her name. These would belonged to her no matter the day's outcome. She clung to that knowledge as she rode out of the stables into the wide open spaces. Drew and Bill could be seen baling hay in the far field. Not having the stamina for a cordial conversation with either she swung Lucky's head around and started toward the uplands. She rode through the hiberating forest where silence broke only beneath the horse hooves, going at a gallop hard and fast from one trail intersecting onto another zigzagging across the vast mountainside. And when she let up and the bay slowed to a leisurely walk between the pines, she came upon what subconsciously she

had been searching for. An X carved into the bark of a nearby tree marked the spot. Automatically her hand pulled rein on Lucky. The footpath leading off the trail to a fishing hole was overgrown and virtually invisible to the uninformed eye. Rachel dismounted to venture, leading the horse into the thick of the forest. Soon the gush of water over the rocks in the streambed reached her ears. And the place where she and her father, Ben, used to go fishing came into sight. She let Lucky go on the banks of the stream that she had once abandoned for cowboy crushes and rodeos on the prairie. Grief overwhelmed her with a sense of presence. Rachel hugged her arms to herself and recalled her seventeenth birthday spent there catching the trout that was served to Roy Buck at dinner that same night. Roy failed to appreciate the catch. The next day Rachel put her fishing pole away in the attic unsuspecting that she had spent her last day fishing with her father.

The skip of a rock across the calm pool of water below the rapids startled her. She glanced down stream. "How long have you been standing there?" she demanded to know of Drew.

"Three skips," he replied and started slowly toward her. "You were daydreaming...of old lovers?"

"What if I was?" she retorted.

"Don't suppose it's any of my business," he said.

"I don't suppose it is," she agreed.

"Such a secluded spot," he added while slapping two flat stones together in the palm of his hands.

"No one would ever find this place on their own," she remarked.

"Why did you follow me?"

"Awfully protective of it, you are," he noticed.

"Didn't you ever have a secret place?" she asked him. "Where you go because you know that no one else will be there?"

"Aye, once, I had a treehouse in my backyard," he said with a slight frown. "Rachel, we need to talk, that's why I'm here."

"Talk about what?" She wanted to ignore him.

"Zelda's going to sell the ranch. There's nothing you can do to change that. It's high time you accept the fact and I'm going to buy it."

"Is that all you have to say for yourself, Drew MacLeod?" She eyed him disappointedly.

"Aye, it is why I followed you—and to tell you that I wouldn't think of making you leave. That is, if you want to stay on—"

"Awfully considerate of you to let me stay on my own ranch," she replied sardonically.

Put out by her attitude, Drew threw the rocks he held to the ground and strutted off to fetch his horse drinking along the bank of the stream. Her eyes were drawn to him mounting the horse to leave.

"They'll be arriving soon," he called from the saddle.

"So they will." She pretended not to care and after he had gone took up the few small stones warmed by the palm of his hand. She went to the streambank and skipped them one, two, three skips to the other side of the waterhole, skipping as good as he. And she could manage the Sterling ranch as good as he. She pulled Lucky away from a patch of tall grass, mounted, and rode back to the stables ahead of Drew who came in surprised to find Lucky ungirthed and feeding from a bucket of oats. Rachel was standing alongside the horse brushing its shiny coat.

"How is it you are here before me?" He asked, seldom one to conceal it when baffled.

"I took a short cut," Rachel told him.

"Which trail?"

"Alpine wilderness to Ram's Run to Valley Splendor," she rattled it off like an old code.

"Apline to Ram's Run can't be done—"

"Can too," she nodded with a pert smile and went around the front of the horse to get a better angle on the bewildered cowboy.

"Where?" he challenged.

Rachel laughed. "There are a lot of things you don't know about Sterling territory, Drew."

"Aye," he muttered. "You're the expert on the place all right," and went to tend to his own horse.

Both of them were puttering about at opposite ends of the stables when the shutting of car doors echoed through the valley. Drew, seeing that the other party had arrived for the signing of the contract, yelled to Rachel to come along. She hurried Bitterroot back to its stall and ran to catch Zelda before the awful occurrence actually happened.

"Rachel, how good it is to see you." Zelda paused on the threshold of the lobby and offered a cheek. "Bring us some coffee, won't you," she prompted.

"Mother." Rachel noticed that Bert and Drew were already seated in the lobby and reviewing some papers. "What are they reading?"

"Why, the contract of course, dear," Zelda replied casually.

"You aren't actually going to sign today—" Rachel protested. "I thought you were coming to talk terms."

"Rachel, Dear," Zelda confided. "The terms were settled days ago. Now, run along and get the coffee. We'll need you to witness the signing." Her mother's hand urged her toward the kitchen of the flat.

"How can you sell Papa's land?" Rachel demanded.

"Rachel—pipe down." A swell of tears came to Zelda's eyes. She glanced about at the four walls of the lobby and sighed. "I can still hear his whistle when I'm in this room." She reached out to take her daughter's hand. "I have no other choice than to sell. I simply cannot bear coming here, too much of him is still alive here, only I can't see him or touch him...I know how you must feel betrayed—"

"Do you?" Rachel withdrew her hand. "It is my ranch too, you might well have sold me."

"Ben wanted better for you, Rachel, than to stay on the place alone like this," Zelda told her out of honest conviction that it was the truth.

"No—" Rachel cried refusing to accept her mother's reasoning. "He never would want it sold, not like this."

"Please, I don't have the energy to fight anymore," Zelda pleaded while attempting to regain her composure. "The Sterling ranch belongs to Drew MacLeod as soon as those papers are signed and if you aren't there to witness I'll call Bill in from the field."

It was as simply as that. Rachel left for the kitchen stunned by her own inability to claim what rightfully belonged to her. Benumbed she went about fixing a pot of freshly brewed coffee and when finished came bringing the tray to Zelda waiting in the lobby. Coffee served, the foursome got down to business. Rachel slouched at one end of a couch and Bert beside her sat on edge to review the documents laid out

on a table in the middle of their circle. Finally he pulled a gold pen from his shirt pocket and handed it across to Drew. "Go ahead, Son," he said. Drew readily accepted the pen and signed the bottom line on the last page then handed the pen to Zelda. The widow made her mark without hesitation and handed the pen to her daughter to witness. Rachel silently put her name on the line below the others, signing over her heritage to a near stranger for an unworthy sum. She handed the pen to Bert next. He signed and it was done. "Well," Drew took up his copy of the contract and stood to extend a handshake in gratitude to Zelda. "If you'll excuse me, I've a ranch to tend to."

"Certainly," the widow poised in her chair congratulated him. Drew walked out with a gleam in his eyes.

"Zelda—" Bert stood to leave a moment later. "By the look on your daughter's face I better find something to occupy my time also—"

"Nonsense," Zelda held him back with the touch of her hand. "Rachel's just had a little spat with a beau of hers..." A second glance at her daughter's distraught face and Zelda added "Perhaps we should all go out for a dinner celebration, uh?"

"Dinner?" Bert checked his watch. "Aye, I guess it is about that time in Boston. I'd be delighted."

Zelda smiled up at the rugged rancher. "I'm simply famished for a good cut of steak. That is one thing I do miss about the west," she admitted.

"Aye, Montana steak can't be beat, except by a porterhouse cut from off the MacLeod range." He boasted.

"That's a tall order, Mr. MacLeod," Zelda replied flirtatiously.

"Well, now, Mrs. Sterling, perhaps you'd like to come for dinner at

the ranch some night after you've taken care of business here. It would be my pleasure to have you--no better steak to be found in the western hemisphere, I assure you."

"An offer like that is tempting," Zelda decided to accept.

"Saturday night?" Bert suggested.

"Saturday would be splended, thank you, Bert," Zelda said.

"Rachel, you're certainly welcome to come," he cordially extended the invitation.

"No, thank you, Mr. MacLeod," Rachel muttered. "I'm not one to tag along."

"Rachel—" Zelda scolded. "Where are your manners?"

"Oh, that's quite alright, leaves all the more for us to enjoy," he replied and went to find the new owner of the ranch.

The lobby fell deathly still. Finally Zelda reached to pour another cup of coffee from the pot. "I suggest getting on the telephone and making amends to that Ryan fellow of yours," she said in the habit of directing her daughter's affairs.

"I told you last night on the telephone that it was over between us," Rachel replied coldly.

"Yes, but you didn't tell me why. I presume it has something to do with losing this old ranch to a deserving cowboy," Zelda attempted to humor her.

"I came back here because it's where I belong—" Rachel said flatly. "Besides, Jesse Ryan and I have nothing in common."

"That's not surprising—" Agitated by circumstances Zelda fretted. "Dare I suggest Boston?" No reply came. "Rachel, I know you don't like the East but what else is there?"

"I still have five foals," Rachel told her. "And one of them has the faculties to go to the top of the quarter horse breeding line."

"Unless you are prepared to submit to Drew MacLeod, I say pack them up and move East. There are plenty of boarding stables--"

"I won't be his slave if that's what you mean," Rachel interrupted.

"Of course not," Zelda replied. "I do believe the young man is fond of you."

"Mother, every eligible bachelor is fond of me in your book."

Rachel half-smiled at the backhanded encouragement.

"Until you've got a catch it makes no sense to confine yourself to one fishinghole. Now, we'd better get freshened up for dinner. It's not polite to keep the men waiting," Zelda said.

"I'm not hungry," Rachel replied.

"All right, Dear." Zelda affectionately abandoned the effort and retreated into the privacy of the flat. Rachel found herself surrounded by an unfriendly solitude. A chill in the air penetrated her bones. She shivered and turned to the supply of logs and kindling stacked in a box beside the stone hearth. Kneeling down on the cold floor she prepared a fire hoping to fill the lobby with a missing warmth. Then she curled up on the couch and let the crackling of the flames dancing on the logs soothe her into slumber.

"Rachel--" Drew stood on the landing of the lobby entranceway and called to an apparently empty room. Smoldering coals were glowing in the fireplace but no answer came. He strutted over to the hearth,

intending to smother the fire and noticed long blond hair falling carelessly over the edge of the couch where she lay. Her arms were wrapped about her upper torso as if holding something cherished. Rather than quell the coals he added new kindling. The flames lit up the lobby, and he went to get a woollen blanket from the linen closet on the second floor. Drew came directly back to cover her. For a moment, after laying the cloth the length of her body, he paused and studied the face aglow in the soft fire light.

When she opened her eye he shyly turned away. "Drew?" Rachel reached out for his arm clothed in a plaid flannel shirt. Her fingers gripped it, never wanting to let go. "You're alright?" In a nightmare she had been watching him competing in the rodeo. When he fell off the bronco a fence had prevented her from getting to him in time to help. It all seemed so very real fresh in her mind.

"Perfectly alright—" he said surprised at the urgent tone of her voice.

"Thank goodness." She relaxed back down on the cushions.

"You were cold." He pointed out the blanket.

"Yes, thank you," she said pulling it close. "This old lobby has a draft the year round. It being so open and all."

"I'll have to consult the architects about how to solve that problem." He stood and aimlessly took up the iron poker to stoke the fire with.

"No—don't—" Rachel warned.

"Do you not trust that Ryan chap?" Drew laughed though his distant glance begged for hearing the truth of their affair.

"He wouldn't care a hoot about preserving the place, it's rustic

charm I mean," she said. "He might try to turn it into an elegant hall—"

"And you?"

"I like the place the way it is."

"Rachel—" He turned to face her. "What exactly went on between the two of you?"

She took to her feet back and forth in front of the hearth.

"Nothing happened between us of any importance—"

"The truth—" he said, needing reassurance ever so much.

"I just told you the truth, Drew MacLeod—" she paused beside him touched by the depth of his sincerity.

His boots pivoted and his large calloused hands went around her drawing their lips together in an earnest kiss. Slowly her arms released the blanket letting it fall to the floor as her arms went around him in mutual embrace. His kiss was hers, one she yearned for. "Rachel," he murmured against the delicate skin of her cheek. "I love you."

"Drew—"

He refrained from indulging in more talk. The revelry of her touch excited his senses and put to rest any doubt he harbored about needing her. There was no other woman whose presence effected him that way. He would never again be at peace without her. "Rachel—marry me."

The fog of a dream quickly lifted from consciousness. She turned abruptly away. "I'm sorry, Drew—" she shook her head in denial. His hand reached out. "Please—"

"Rachel look at me." He gripped her slender shoulders and swung her round to face him. "Can you honestly tell me that you don't want me

as much as I want you?"

"I can't help thinking that without the title to the ranch you never would have offered to—"

"Forget about my buying the ranch," he demanded. "As far as I'm concerned it's still yours."

"No—Drew—you put the ranch between us." She glanced sidelong into his eyes that flashed like a thunderbolt announcing a storm. The rage on his face and the hurt behind it sent a shiver up her spine. His stance stiffened. "I cannot change your seeing it that way." His lengthy footsteps carried him across the wooden floor of the lobby to the double doors that rattled with a slam when he left.

Rachel had never before seen him so upset.

The foal named Bitterroot after the flowers that claimed the valley floor in the summer tugged at the lunge-line she held absentmindedly in the palm of her right hand. At least there was one aspect of the ranch that she and Drew both agreed on, the fact that this foal showed promise from the start. While the cowboy boasted helping to deliver the sire of the next generation Rachel kept to the practical aspects like spending extra training time with him. She fed the foal more line and watched him prance with high hooves around the paddock. Such confident mannerisms. The foal would surely find a place in the Denver showing next spring. That hope in Bitterroot was her only insight to the future. Contemplating a move East Rachel glanced around at the stables her grandfather had built and the additional box stalls Ben had put up

when she was nine and full of talk about owning foals like Bitterroot. There at the far end of the building stood Drew, his stocky frame silhouetted by the bright morning sun shining in on the stable floor. Hesitantly he started walking toward her. "Rachel—" he called from a distance outside the area around which Bitterroot pranced.

"Yes, Drew?" She pulled the line in on the foal making an attempt to give the new owner of the ranch her undivided attention. After all they had been through he deserved at least that much. The flash of anger had vanished from his eyes. This morning he regarded her with a serious gaze that hid none of the love he professed to hold. "I'm driving Bert back to Calgary. And," he fidgeted with the rim of his stetson hat that dangled from the grip of his fingers. "Plan to be gone indefinitely. I would appreciate it if you would accept the position of managing the place—"

"On what terms?" she interjected.

"Rachel, last night I went back to the bunk house madder than a bull kept too long in its stall and bucking to beat all. Damn it, when I heard the place was for sale my first thought was to buy it so you wouldn't have to worry any more about it and I would have me a permanent home. I've lived on the rodeo circuit too long not to what it's like not having a place to call your own. I just never thought of buying the ranch as taking it away from you. But, I reckon it is." He stopped talking and looked her straight in the eye. "I done wrong. If you don't want me on the place—I'll just have to live with my mistake—it's up to you—"

"Drew—" she heaved a gleeful sigh. "You know I'd never leave here unless I had to."

"I'm doing my best to keep it that way," he assured her. "Now—I think it's best I go." He turned and started walking.

Rachel dropped the lunge-line and ran after him. "Drew—you don't have to go—"

"Aye—but I do," he half-turned to acknowledge.

"Then, promise me you'll come back because," she said. "I think I love you."

"Just thinking about loving me isn't enough, Rachel. I got to have your all or none at all." He walked on outside and climbed into the pick-up truck that sat idling in the middle of the dirt road. Rachel stood pensively on the threshold of the stables and watched the vehicle disappearing into the thick of the forest. Love will bring him back, she told herself and lifted a gaze to the Sterling Ranch Welcome sign that hung from the porch roof where it still hangs.

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