

## FIVE



BEN ROLLED, GAINED HIS FEET. THIS TIME, AS WILLA RAN behind him she could admire the speed with which he could move. The screams were still echoing when he wrenched open the front door.

“Christ.” He muttered it even as he stepped over the bloody mess on the porch and gathered Lily in his arms. “It’s all right, honey.” Automatically he shifted so that he blocked her view and, with his hands stroking easy down her back, looked over her head into Willa’s eyes.

The shock was there, but it wasn’t the quaking, glassy-eyed horror of the woman he held. This one was fragile, he thought, whereas Willa would always be sturdy.

“You ought to get her inside,” he said to Willa.

But Willa was shaking her head, staring down now at the mangled and bloody mess at her feet. “Must be one of the barn cats.” Or it had been, she thought grimly, before someone had decapitated it and cut its guts open and left it like a gory gift at her front door.

“Take her inside, Will,” Ben repeated.

The screams had brought others running. Adam was the

first to reach the porch. The first thing he saw was Lily weeping in Ben's arms. The quick hitch in his gut had almost as much to do with that as what he saw spread on the porch.

Instinctively he stepped up, laid a hand on her arm, soothing when she jerked. "It's all right, Lily."

"Adam, I saw . . ." Nausea churned a storm in her stomach.

"I know. You go on inside now. Look at me," he murmured, carefully easing her away from Ben and leading her around and toward the door. "Willa's going to take you inside."

"Look, I've got—"

"Take care of your sister, Will," Adam interrupted, and taking her hand, placed it firmly over Lily's.

Willa lost the battle when Lily's hand trembled under hers. With a mumbled oath she tugged. "Come on. You need to sit down."

"I saw—"

"Yeah, I know what you saw. Forget it." Willa closed the door with a decisive click, leaving the men to ponder the headless corpse on the porch.

"Christ, Adam, is that a cat?" Jim Brewster swiped a hand over his mouth. "Somebody sure did a number on it."

Adam glanced back, studying each man in turn: Jim, face pale, Adam's apple bobbing; Ham tight-lipped; Pickles with a rifle over his shoulder. There was Billy Vincent, barely eighteen and all eager eyes, and Wood Book, stroking his silky black beard.

It was Wood who spoke, his voice calm. "Where's the head? Don't see it there." He stepped closer. It was Wood who oversaw the planting, tending, and harvesting of grain, and his wife, Nell, who cooked for the ranch hands. He smelled of Old Spice and peppermint candy. Adam knew him to be a steady man, as implacable as the Rock of Gibraltar.

"Whoever did this might like trophies." Adam's words stopped the murmurs. Only Billy continued to babble.

"Jee-sus Christ, you ever seen anything like that? Spread

the guts all over hell and back, didn't he? Now who'd do that to some stupid cat? What do you think—"

"Shut the hell up, Billy, you asshole." The weary order came from Ham. He sighed once, took out his pack of smokes. "Get on back to supper, all of you. Nothing for you to do here now but gawk like a bunch of old ladies at a fashion show."

"Don't have much appetite," Jim murmured, but he and the others drifted back.

"Sure is a sorry mess," Ham commented. "Guess a kid might do this. Wood's boys are a little wild, but they're not mean. You ask me, it takes mean to do this. But I'll talk to them."

"Ham, mind if I ask if you know what the men have been up to for the past hour?"

Ham studied Ben through a haze of smoke. "Been here and there, washing up for supper and the like. I haven't had my eye on them, if that's what you're asking. The men that work here don't go cutting up a cat for frolic."

Ben merely nodded. It wasn't his place to ask more, and they both knew it. "It had to have happened in the last hour. I've been here awhile, and this wasn't here before."

Ham sucked in more smoke, nodded. "I'll talk to Wood's boys." He gave one last look at what lay on the porch. "Sure is a sorry mess," he repeated, then walked away.

"You've had two animals torn up in a week, Adam."

Adam crouched down, laid his fingertip on the bloody fur. "His name was Mike. He was old, mostly blind in one eye, and should have died in his sleep."

"I'm sorry about that." Ben understood the affection, even the intimacy, with animals well and dropped a hand on Adam's shoulder. "I think you've got a real problem here."

"Yeah. Wood's boys didn't do this. They've got no harm in them. And they weren't up in the hills slaughtering a steer either."

"No, I wouldn't say they were. How well do you know your men?"

Adam lifted his gaze. Whatever the grief, it was hard,

direct. "The men aren't my territory. The horses are." Still warm, he thought as he stroked the matted fur. Cooling fast, but still warm. "I know them well enough. All but Billy have been here for years, and he signed on last summer. You'd have to ask Willa, she'd know more." He looked down again and grieved for an old half-blind tom who had still liked to hunt. "Lily shouldn't have seen this."

"No, she shouldn't have." Ben sighed and wondered how close she'd come to seeing who it was. "I'll help you bury him."

Inside, Willa paced the living room. How the hell was she supposed to take care of the woman? And why had Adam pushed such a useless task on her? All Lily did was cower in the corner of the sofa and shake.

She'd given Lily whiskey, hadn't she? She'd even patted her head for lack of anything better. She had a problem on her hands, for God's sake, and she didn't need some weak-stomached Easterner to add to it.

"I'm sorry." Those were the first words she'd managed since she'd come inside. Taking a deep breath, Lily tried them again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have screamed that way. I've never seen anything . . . I'd been with Adam, helping with the horses, and then I . . . I just—"

"Drink the damn whiskey, would you?" Willa snapped, then cursed herself as Lily cringed and obediently lifted the glass to her lips. Disgusted with herself, Willa rubbed her hands over her face. "I expect anybody would have screamed coming across something like that. I'm not mad at you."

Lily hated whiskey, the burn of it, the smell. Jesse had favored Seagram's. And as the level in the bottle dropped, his temper rose. Always. But now she pretended to drink. "Was it a cat? I thought it was a cat." Lily bit down hard on her lip to keep her voice steady. "Was it your cat?"

"The cats are Adam's. And the dogs. And the horses. But they did it to me. They didn't leave it on Adam's porch. They did it to me."

"Like—like the steer."

Willa stopped pacing, glanced over her shoulder. "Yes. Like the steer."

"Here's a nice pot of tea." Bess hurried in, carrying a tray. The minute she set it down, she began fussing. "Will, what are you thinking of, giving the poor thing whiskey? It's just going to upset her stomach is all." Gently, Bess took the glass from Lily and set it aside. "You drink some tea, honey, and rest yourself. You've had a bad shock. Will, stop that pacing and sit down."

"You take care of her. I'm going out."

Though she poured the tea with a steady hand, Bess gave Willa's retreating back a hard look. "That girl never listens."

"She's upset."

"Aren't we all."

Lily lifted the cup with both hands, felt the warmth spread at the first sip. "She takes it deeper. It's her ranch."

Bess cocked her head. "Yours too."

"No." Lily drank again, gradually grew calmer. "It'll always be hers."

The cat was gone, but there was still blood pooled over the wood. Willa went back for a bucket of soapy water, a scrub brush. Bess would have done it, she knew, but it wasn't something she would ask of another.

On her hands and knees, in the glow of the porch light she washed away the signs of violence. Death happened. She had believed she accepted and understood that. Cattle were raised for their meat, and a chicken who stopped laying ended up in the pot. Deer and elk were hunted and set on the table.

That was the way of things.

People lived, and died.

Even violence wasn't a stranger to her. She had sent a bullet into living flesh and dressed game with her own hands. Her father had insisted on that, had ordered her to learn to hunt, to watch a buck go down bleeding. That she could live with.

But this cruelty, this waste, this viciousness that had been laid at her door wasn't part of the cycle. She erased it, every

drop. And with the bloody bucket beside her, she sat back on her heels and stared up into the sky.

A star died, even as she watched, blazing its white trail across the night and falling into oblivion.

From somewhere near an owl hooted, and she knew prey would be scrambling for cover. For tonight there was a hunter's moon, full and bright. Tonight there would be death—in the forest, in the hills, in the grass. There was no denying it.

It should not have made her want to weep.

She heard the footsteps and hastily composed herself. She was getting to her feet as Ben and Adam came around the side of the house.

"I would have done that, Will." Adam took the bucket from her. "There was no need for you to do this."

"It's done." She reached out, touched his face. "I'm sorry, Adam, about Mike."

"He used to like to sun himself on the rock behind the pole barn. We buried him there." He glanced toward the window. "Lily?"

"Bess is with her. She'll do her more good than I would."

"I'll get rid of this, then check on her."

"All right." But she kept her hand on his cheek another moment, murmured something in the language of their mother.

It made him smile, not the comforting words as much as the tongue. She rarely used it, and only when it mattered most. He stepped away and left her with Ben.

"You've got a problem on your hands, Will."

"I've got several of them."

"Whoever did that did it while we were inside." Wrestling, he thought, like a couple of idiot children. "Ham's going to talk to Wood's kids."

"Joe and Pete?" Will snorted, then rocked on her heels to comfort herself. "No way in hell and back, Ben. Those boys like to run wild around here and regularly beat the hell out of each other, but they aren't going to torture some old cat."

He rubbed the scar on his chin. "Saw that, did you?"

"I've got eyes, don't I?" She had to take a steadying breath as her stomach tipped again. "Cut little pieces off of him, and it looked like burns, probably from a cigarette on the fur. It wasn't Wood's boys. Adam gave them a couple of kittens last spring. They spoil those cats like babies."

"Adam piss anybody off lately?"

She didn't look down at him. "They didn't do it to Adam. They did it to me."

"Okay." Because he saw it the same way, he nodded. And he worried. "You piss anybody off lately?"

"Besides you?"

He smiled a little, climbed up a step until they were eye to eye. "You've been pissing me off all your life. Hardly counts. I mean it, Willa." He closed a hand over hers, linked fingers. "Is there anybody you can think of who'd want to hurt you?"

Baffled by the link, she stared down at their joined hands. "No. Pickles and Wood, they might have their noses a little out of joint now that I'm in charge. Pickles especially. It's the female thing. But they haven't got anything against me personally."

"Pickles was up in high country," Ben pointed out. "Would he do something like this to get at you? Scare the female?"

She sneered out her pride. "Do I look scared?"

"I'd feel better if you did." But he shrugged. "Would he do it?"

"A couple of hours ago I'd have said no. Now I can't be sure." That was the worst of it, she realized. Not being sure who to trust, or how much to trust them. "I wouldn't think so. He's got a temper and he likes to bitch and stew, but I can't see him killing things for no reason."

"I'd say there's a reason here. That's what we have to figure out."

She angled her chin. "Do we?"

"Your land marches with mine, Will. And for the next year you're part of my responsibilities." He only tightened his grip when she tugged at her hand. "That's a fact, and I

imagine we'll both get used to it. I aim to keep my eye on you, and yours."

"You keep it too close, Ben, it's liable to get blackened."

"I'll take that chance." But just in case, he took her other hand, held them both at her sides. "I have a feeling I'm going to find the next year interesting. All around interesting. I haven't wrestled with you in . . . must be twenty years. You filled out nice."

Knowing she was outweighed and outmuscled, she stood still. "You've got a real way with words, Ben. Like poetry. You should feel my heart thudding."

"Honey, I'd love to, but you'd just try to deck me."

She smiled and felt better for it. "No, Ben. I *would* deck you. Now go away. I'm tired and I want my supper."

"I'm going." But not quite yet, he thought. He slid his hands up to her wrists and was intrigued to find her pulse hammering there. You wouldn't have known it from her eyes, so cool and dark. You wouldn't know a lot, he decided from just a quick look at Willa Mercy. "Aren't you going to kiss me good night?"

"I'd just spoil you for all those other women you like to play with."

"I'd take my chances on that, too." But he backed off. It wasn't the time, or the place. Still, he had a feeling he'd be looking for both very soon. "I'll be back."

"Yeah." She dipped her hands into her pockets as he climbed into his rig. Her pulse was still drumming. "I know."

She waited until his taillights disappeared down the long dirt road. Then she glanced over her shoulder at the house, at the lights. She wanted that hot bath, that hot meal, and a long night's sleep. But all of that would have to wait. Mercy Ranch was hers, and she had to talk to her men.

As operator, she tried to stay away from the bunkhouse. She believed the men were entitled to their privacy, and this wood-framed building with its rocking chairs on the porch was their home. Here they slept and ate, read their books if reading was what pleased them. They played cards and ar-

gued over them, watched television and complained about the boss.

Nell would cook the meals in the bungalow she shared with Wood and their sons, then cart the food over. She didn't serve the men, and one of them was assigned cleanup duty every week. That way they could eat as they pleased. They might eat dusty from work, or in their underwear. They could lie about women or the size of their cocks.

It was, after all, their home.

So she knocked and waited to be hailed inside. They were all there but Wood, who was eating his supper at home with his family. The men ranged around the table, Ham at the head, his chair tipped back since he'd just finished his meal. Billy and Jim continued to shovel in chicken and dumplings like a pair of wolves vying for meat. Pickles washed his back with beer and scowled.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your meal."

"We're about done here," Ham told her. "Billy, get to the dishes. You eat any more, you'll bust. You want some coffee, Will?"

"I wouldn't mind." She walked to the stove herself, poured a cup, and left it black. She understood that this was a delicate matter and she'd have to be both tactful and direct. "I can't figure who would slice up that old cat." She sipped, let it stew. "Anybody have an idea?"

"I checked on Wood's boys." Ham rose to pour coffee for himself. "Nell says they were in the house with her most of the evening. Now they both have pocketknives, and Nell had them fetch them to show me. They were clean." He grimaced as he drank. "The younger one, Pete, he busted out crying when he heard about old Mike. Tall boy, Pete. You forget he's only eight."

"I heard about kids doing shit like that." Pickles sulked in his beer. "Grow up to be serial killers."

Willa spared him a glance. If anybody found a way to make things worse, it was Pickles. "I don't think Wood's boys are John Wayne Gacys in training."

"Coulda been McKinnon." Billy clattered dishes in the sink and hoped Willa would notice him. He was always

hoping she'd notice him; his crush on her was as wide as Montana. "He was here." He jerked his head to flop his straw-colored hair out of his eyes. Scrubbed harder than necessary at dishes so the muscles on his arms would flex. "And his men were up in the hills when the steer got laid open."

"You ought to think before you start flapping your lips, you asshole." Ham made the statement without heat. Anyone under thirty, in his mind, had the potential to be an asshole. Billy, with his eager eyes and imagination, had more potential than most. "McKinnon isn't a man who'd cut up some damn cat."

"Well, he was here," Billy said stubbornly, and slanted his eyes sideways to see if Willa was listening.

"He was here," she agreed. "And he was inside with me. I let him into the house myself, and there wasn't anything on the porch then."

"Nothing like this happened when the old man was around." Pickles tipped back his beer again and flicked a glance at Willa.

"Come on, Pickles." Uncomfortable, Jim shifted in his creaking chair. "You can't blame Will for something like this."

"Just stating fact."

"That's right." Willa nodded equably. "Nothing like this happened when the old man was around. But he's dead, and I'm in charge now. And when I find out who did this, I'll take care of them personally." She set her cup down. "I'd like all of you to think about it, to see if you remember anything, or saw anything, anyone. If something comes to you, you know where to find me."

When the door closed behind her, Ham kicked at Pickles's chair and nearly sent it out from under him. "Why do you have to be such a damn fool? That girl's never done anything but her best."

"She's a female, ain't she?" And that, he thought, was that. "You can't trust them, and you sure as hell can't depend on them. Who's to say whoever cut up a cow and a cat won't try it on a man next?" He swigged his beer while

he let that little seed root. "Are you going to look to her to watch your back? I know I'm not."

Billy bobbed a dish. His eyes were huge and filled with glassy excitement. "You think somebody'd try to do that to one of us? Try to knife us?"

"Oh, shut the hell up." Ham slammed down his cup. "Pickles is just trying to get everybody worked up 'cause his pecker's in a twist at having a woman in charge. Killing cows and some old flea-bitten cat isn't like doing a man."

"Ham's right." But Jim had to swallow, and he wasn't interested in the rest of the dumpling on his plate. "But maybe it wouldn't hurt to be careful for a while. There are two more women on the ranch now." He pushed away his plate as he rose. "Maybe we should look after them."

"I'll look after Will," Billy said quickly, and earned a quick cuff on the ear from Ham.

"You'll do your work like always. I'm not having a bunch of pussies jumping at shadows over a cat." He topped off his coffee, picked up the cup again. "Pickles, if you haven't got anything intelligent to say, keep your mouth shut. That goes for the rest of you too." He took a moment to aim a beady eye at every man, then nodded, satisfied. "I'm going to watch *Jeopardy*."

"I tell you this," Pickles said under his breath. "I'm keeping my rifle close and a knife in my boot. If I see anybody acting funny around here, I'll take care of them. And I'll take care of myself." He took his beer and stalked outside.

Jim bypassed the coffeepot for a beer himself, glancing at Billy's pale face along the way. Poor kid, he thought, he'll be having nightmares for sure. "He's just blowing it out his ass, Billy. You know how he is."

"Yeah, but—" He wiped a hand over his mouth. It was just a cat, he reminded himself. Just an old, mangy cat. "Yeah, I know how he is."

WILLA HAD NIGHTMARES. THEY WOKE HER IN A COLD sweat with her heart pounding against her ribs and a scream locked in her throat. She fought her way out of the tangle

of sheets, struggling for air. Alone and shivering, she sat in the center of the bed as the moonlight streamed through her windows and a fitful little breeze tapped slyly on the glass.

She couldn't remember clearly what had haunted her sleep. Blood, fear, panic. Knives. A headless cat stalking her. She tried to laugh over it, dropped her head on her drawn-up knees, and tried hard to laugh at herself. It came perilously close to a sob.

Her legs threatened to buckle when she climbed out of bed, but she made herself walk into the bath, switched on the light, lowered her head over the sink, and ran the water icy cold into her cupped hands. It was better then, with the clammy sweat washed off. Lifting her head, she studied herself in the mirror.

It was still the same face. That hadn't changed. Nothing had changed, really. It had simply been a hellish night. Didn't she have the right to be shaken, just a little, by all that was going on? Worry was like lead on her shoulders, and she had to carry it alone. There was no passing it off, no sharing the load.

The sisters were hers, and the ranch, and whatever was plaguing it. She would handle it all.

And if there was a change inside her, something irksome, something she recognized as essentially female, she would handle that as well. She didn't have the time or the temperament to play mating games with Ben McKinnon.

Oh, he was just trying to rile her anyway. She brushed the hair away from her damp cheeks, poured cold water into a glass. He'd never been interested in her. If he was now, it was only for the hell of it. Which was just like Ben. She nearly smiled as she let the water cool her throat.

She thought she might kiss him after all. Just to get it out of the way. A kind of test. She might sleep better for it. That might chase him out of her dreams and nightmares. And once she stopped wondering, stopped thinking about what kept stirring inside her, she would be able to concentrate more fully on the ranch.

She looked toward the bed, shuddered. She needed to

sleep, but she didn't want to see the blood again, to see the mangled bodies. So she wouldn't.

She took a deep breath before climbing back into bed. She'd will them away, think of something else. Of spring that was so far off. Of flowers blooming in meadows and warm breezes floating down from the hills.

But when she dreamed, she dreamed of blood and death and terror.