

Joshua and Helen

By Kate Simon

Joshua Morgan walked out of the Carson County courthouse with Mickey Grant snapping at his heels. He adjusted his Stetson to block the blaring sun.

"Thanks Mr. Morgan. You were great in there."

He stopped and looked at Mickey Grant, the snot nosed eighteen year old son of the biggest rancher in the county. He had gotten hammered at a local dive and chose to drive his F-250 after eight beers. He plowed head on into the small sedan of John and Lee Packer and their three year old daughter, Annie Rose, killing them instantly. Mickey walked away with barely a scratch. Josh went into court and did his job. Everyone, even this unrepentant piece of shit, deserved a defense. Mickey walked away from court with a fine and losing his license for a year.

"How about some lunch at Rose's. I'll buy." The kid pulled his car keys from his jacket pocket.

"You lost your license for a year. You can not get behind the wheel of a car."

"Pfft," he said as waved his hands dismissively. "That's no big deal."

He looked at the stupid grin on his face and remembered the accident photos. He grabbed Mickey by the throat and slammed him up against a brick pillar. "No big deal? No big deal? You killed three people including a three year old girl and it's no big deal?" He snatched the keys from Mickey's hand and hurled them into small but fast moving creek across the street.

"What the hell?" yelled Mickey. "How am I supposed to get home?"

He released the boy and continued his walk down the courthouse steps.

"I'll call my father. You'll be sorry."

Josh tipped his hat to the group of women coming up the steps and kept walking.

Josh sat outside of the coffee shop in one of the wicker chairs. He watched what amounted to rush hour in Bridgerton. It was just past noon and the courthouse and office buildings were starting to clear out for lunch. The sidewalks on both sides of the street were crowded with people making their ways to the restaurants and delis that occupied the street.

"Hey Josh," said Connie, twenty something waitress with a long braid of blond hair down her back. "Ah, did you lose your case?"

He managed a small smile. "No, actually. I didn't lose." He hadn't lost but he sure as hell didn't win.

"So why the long face?"

"It's just been a long week, Connie. Can I get my usual?"

"Sure thing. Ice tea and cheeseburger."

"Thanks."

Connie smiled. "You're welcome. Can I get you anything else?"

Josh managed a smile. "Thanks, Connie. I'm good." As she turned to go inside he heard her mutter, "I bet you are."

He shook his head and smiled. Connie had made it clear she was interested but she was half his age. He preferred women who remembered the same presidents he did. Not that there had been much of that lately. It had been months since he'd been on a real date. He just wasn't interested. Nothing really interested him these days.

He'd been in practice for thirty years. He'd worked hard, too hard. He'd been a scholarship student at University of Houston. He'd worked his ass off in high school and he made the most of it when he got to college. He graduated at the top of his class. He came back to Bridgerton and married his high school sweetheart. Betty had expected her lawyer husband would be home occasionally or at least be able to afford nice things. Just starting out he couldn't do either. His marriage went up in flames after five years. He hadn't been in any real relationship since.

Maybe he'd head out to the ranch this weekend. He hadn't had a good ride in weeks. A long ride on Pegasus always made him feel better. Maybe that's what he needed.

He noticed a woman standing still on the sidewalk in front of the store. She was watching him as the pedestrians flowed around her like a stone in a stream. She wore a crisp white shirt tucked into a pair of fitted jeans and sneakers. Nobody in this town wore sneakers unless they were running track. Her hair was jet black hair and eyes so blue he couldn't stop staring. He smiled and touched the brim of his Stetson in salute.

"Here you go," Connie said as she set his food in front of him.

"Thanks Connie."

Josh looked back at the sidewalk and the foot traffic was flowing uninterrupted. He

stood and looked in both directions. She was gone.

Josh went back to his office after lunch and was greeted with a disapproving look from Dolores, his assistant. Dolores was a terrific assistant but occasionally slipped into Mom mode.

"What?" he asked.

"Mr. Grant called."

"I take it he's not happy with me."

"Did you really toss Mickey's keys in the creek?"

"He'd just lost his license and the little shit was going to drive."

"Well, it's a good thing I already cashed his check." She turned back to her monitor. "I'd avoid him for awhile if I were you."

Josh walked into his office and tossed his briefcase aside. He flipped through the messages and didn't see anything that couldn't wait. He spun his chair to look out his window. He had prime office space walking distance from the courthouse. He had a nice condo in town and a one hundred acre ranch just out side town. He had what anyone would define as a great life. Everyone except him.

His mind wandered to the woman in front of the coffee shop. She'd looked like she'd been studying him. He didn't recognize her, and sneakers? Nobody wears sneakers. She must be a transplant, probably a yankee.

"Good Lord," he thought. "I'm thinking about strange women on the street. Beautiful but strange."

Josh shouted from his desk. "Dolores, I'm going out to the ranch this weekend. Refer any new drunken lowlifes with a checkbook to Sam Chaffee." He looked up to see her in the doorway.

"This was a tough one," she said. He nodded. "You did your job, Joshua."

"Yeah, I did. But sometimes my job really sucks."

Dolores walked around his desk and put her hand on his shoulder. "I'd tell you not to beat yourself up if I thought it would do any good."

He smiled. Sometimes her Mom mode was a good thing. "Thanks."

"Did you eat?"

"Yeah, I grabbed a burger. Hey, do know a woman, late forties, long black hair, and sneakers?"

"Sneakers? Who wears sneakers? No she doesn't sound familiar, why do you ask?"

"No reason."

Dolores walked back to her desk, smiling.

Josh pushed his cart down the aisle to the produce. He hadn't done any grocery shopping in a week. He'd grab stuff for a salad, some fruit and a steak for later. He was trying to decide between Delmonico or strip when he caught a flash of black hair out of the corner of his eye. He walked away from his basket and up the next aisle. Long black hair, jeans and sneakers. It was her. He reached for shoulder. "Hello."

She turned away from the pasta to look at him. She smiled but didn't speak.

"You were in front of the Rose's coffee shop this morning." She was looking at him like she had this morning, as if she were studying him. He couldn't help but stand closer.

"I'm Joshua Morgan."

"I know," she whispered.

"I don't know your name."

"I know that too." She touched his cheek with her hand and smiled. Then she leaned in and kissed him, a quick but passionate kiss. He was trying to regain his balance when a shopping cart came around the corner behind him.

"Josh Morgan is that you?"

He turned to see his neighbor standing behind him. "Hello Mrs. Lundy."

"I haven't seen you in weeks when you live right next door. Now I see you in the middle of Whole Foods."

"It's been a busy time."

"Of course. You have to come over sometime. You know how much you love my baked apples."

He nodded and smiled. "Will do, ma'am."

He turned back around and she was gone. He hadn't heard her go. Damn sneakers.

Josh had worked in Bridgerton most of his life. He knew just about everyone. Those he didn't, knew him. The upside to handling high profile cases, he was in the paper alot. He wasn't about to camp out the pasta aisle until she came back. He found the store manager.

"Excuse me, sir," he began.

"Theodore Brown but you can call me Teddy. What can I do for you Mr. Morgan?"

"I assume the security cameras are live."

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"No but would you mind if I took a look at some of the footage?"

He hesitated. "Well, I really shouldn't but I guess it's okay, being who your are and everything."

"Thanks Teddy."

The manager led him to a small security room with multiple cameras. "Can you show me footage from the last thirty minutes?"

"Sure."

Josh looked at footage from multiple angles until he spotted her. "There. Her." Teddy stopped the playback. "Do you know her?"

"No. She's been in a few times. I normally don't notice, but well, I couldn't help it."

"I know exactly what you mean. Can you print that?"

"Sure." Teddy hit a button and a picture of the woman printed out." He handed it to Josh. "Did she do something?"

"No. I just really need to find her." All he had to do is figure out how.

Josh was not someone who called in favors, but today he was making an exception. He walked into John Cramer's office and waved at his secretary. Josh and John had known each other since high school. John had been Bridgerton's sheriff for ten years. He was a good guy who occasionally came out to his ranch to ride.

"Hi, Mr. Morgan"

"Hi, Janie. Is he in?"

"Sure. Go on in."

He knocked on the door and stuck his head in. "Hey John. Do you have a minute?"

"Hey, Josh, what's up?"

"I need a favor." He pulled the security picture from his briefcase. "I need to find this woman."

"Is she a suspect?"

"No." He stammered. "I just need to find her." He could feel his blush rising.

John laughed. He knew him too well. "So who is she?"

"That's what I need you to find out."

"You don't even know her name?"

"No. Look, it's a long story. Can you find her?"

"Do you have any idea where to start?"

"This was taken at the Whole Foods on Oak. The manager said she's been in a few times, so she must be local. And I think she's a transplant. Probably up north."

John looked at the picture and smiled. "Very pretty. Look, Josh, it's not like I've got facial recognition software. We're Bridgerton PD, not the FBI. I'll see what I can find out." He hit the button on his intercom. "Hey Janie, can you come in?"

Janie opened the door. "What's up?"

John handed her the picture. "Do you recognize her?"

"Sure."

"You do?" Josh asked.

"Yeah, that's Helen Trent, from the bookstore over on Main. She took it over from her grandmother a couple of months ago when she retired. Came from up north. Pennsylvania I think."

John laughed. "Bridgerton's own facial rec program."

Josh got up and took back the picture. "Thanks guys."

John called after him. "Let me know how you make out." Josh barely heard him.

Josh sat in his car across the street from Main Street Books. He spotted a flash of long dark hair, so he knew she was in there. So why wasn't he getting out of the car. This was ridiculous. He was fifty five years old. Far too old to behave like a teenage boy.

The door chime rang as he walked into the store. Helen looked up and smiled.

"You found me. I'm impressed Mr. Morgan."

"I think you should call me Josh, Helen." She walked close enough to smell her perfume. It wasn't the usual floral, girly perfume. It was spice based. Not a surprise.

"So, how did you find me?"

"I can't reveal my sources."

Helen smiled. "Did you break any laws?"

Josh grinned. "Nah, just bent them a little."

"Even better." Helen looked over a sales girl behind a large stack of Harry Potter books. "Becky, keep an eye on things for me." She turned and walked into the back room, assuming he would follow. "So you found me. Now what?"

"This." He slipped his hand behind her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. When he pulled back he whispered, "Now we're even." He stepped back and looked at her, much in the way she'd looked at him. Trying to figure her out. "Why were you watching me?"

"I noticed you, cowboy. I like your eyes."

"I noticed you too. Why did you leave the grocery?"

"I figured a clever man like you, if you were interested you'd find me. I wanted to see if you were up to the challenge. Apparently you are."

Josh felt like he was going round for round with well matched opponent. "You knew my name when I walked in."

"I read the papers"

"I suggest we get the preliminaries out of the way. Josh Morgan, fifty five. Born and raised in Bridgerton. Divorced, no kids."

She looked like she was debating answering the question. "Helen Trent, fifty."

"Really? Huh."

She smiled. "Born and raised in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Never married, no kids."

"Okay, preliminaries out of the way. I suggest a proper date, tonight. I'll pick you up at seven and try to impress you with my ability to get a reservation at Pandora's on short notice."

Helen nodded. "Pandora's. Nice." She picked up a business card and wrote her address and phone number on the back. "Here you go. I'll see you at seven."

"Yes ma'am" He touched the brim of his hat.

"And cowboy,"

He stopped and smiled.

"Wear the hat."

Helen hadn't been nervous on a date in forever. She's put on her favorite blue dress that was modestly cut but showed over her curves. She never wore black. With her hair and fair coloring she'd be mistaken for Morticia Adams. She hadn't had that much time to get ready even though she left the store as soon as she saw Josh's car drive away. Becky had smiled and winked when she'd asked her to close up.

She was delighted he'd gone to some trouble to find her. From what she'd read, Joshua Morgan was an honest, straightforward man. He was well respected. When she'd spotted him on the porch at Rose's she couldn't help but look. He was so alone. He also had killer blue eyes.

The doorbell rang and she glanced at the clock and smiled. Exactly seven p.m. When she opened the door her smile got very big. Josh was wearing a black suit and vest, crisp white shirt and tie, black boots and a black Stetson. He was also holding a single red rose.

"Please come in." He handed her the rose and gave her a quick kiss. "Thank you." He followed her into the kitchen while she found a bud vase. She looked at him and smiled. "Different hat."

"This would be my 'Sunday go to Meetin' hat," he said in an exaggerated drawl.

"Well, it's very nice. You look very handsome."

"Thank you, Helen," he said quietly. He touched her long hair. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." Helen watched as he continued to stare. "You look like you want to kiss me," she said.

"I do."

She smiled. "Then you should."

He slipped his hands around her waist and pulled her close. He kissed her softly. Helen put her hands behind his neck as she deepened the kiss. She felt his groan of satisfaction as their tongues tangled and danced. When they pulled apart they were both

flushed.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much," he smiled as he touched her hair.

"We should go. Don't want to lose our table," she said.

"I can't impress you if that happens," he smiled as he held the door for her.

"Oh, you've already impressed me, cowboy."

Pandora's was full as usual but Jamie held a table for him. He'd successfully defended him against a bogus liability claim. He was able to prove that plaintiff was a professional slip and fall guy. It could have cost him millions. Josh could always get a table.

"It's lovely here," said Helen as Josh held out her chair.

Jamie came to their table with a broad smile and a bottle of wine. He was a thin man with short curly brown hair and horned rimmed glasses. "Josh, I haven't seen you in ages."

"Sorry. It's been a busy time."

"Who do we have here?"

"This is Helen Trent. She owns the bookstore on Main. Helen this is Jamie Cook."

Josh could see Helen fighting a laugh.

"Go ahead. Everyone does. It's the reason I ask everyone to call me Jaime," he said.

Helen laughed and shook his hand. "It's very nice to meet you, Jamie."

Jaime uncorked the bottle and poured them each a glass. "This is an excellent cabernet."

"Thanks Jaime," said Josh.

"Please let me know if you need anything. Your server will be right with you."

Helen took a sip and smiled. "Oh, that is good." She opened her menu. "What do you recommend?"

"Everything is good, but I really like the seabass. I'm not quite sure what he does to it but it's delicious." He caught a surprised look from her. "What?" he smiled. "We don't all live on steaks and barbeque." The server took their orders and they both ordered the

seabass.

Josh took a sip of his wine and smiled. He'd never experienced anything like Helen Trent. "What did you do before you took over the bookstore?"

She smiled. "We already covered the preliminary get to know you's so now were into the backstory."

"That sounds about right."

"Okay." She took another sip of wine. "I was a professor of Literature at Penn State."

"A professor?"

"You think selling books is a step down."

"I didn't say that." But he was thinking it.

Helen smiled. "Don't worry. I'm not offended. All my colleagues thought I was insane. Walking away from a tenured position to take over Gran's store."

"Why did you?"

"Because I looked around at my life one day and thought I don't want to do this anymore. I worked my whole life to get to where I was, studied my ass off, BA, MA, PhD. Everything I was supposed to do."

"PhD?" he smiled and took another sip of wine.

"Don't worry I won't make you call me Doctor." She got a wicked smile. "At least not yet."

He nearly spit out his wine.

She continued her story but he saw a deep sadness. "I worked all those years, spent twenty five years teaching. One day I looked at my students and saw a room of disinterested faces. They were in my classes because they needed an English credit to graduate. I spent my life studying the beauty of the written word. They couldn't have cared less."

"I'm sure not all your students were like that."

"No they weren't. I had some very bright grad students and doctoral candidates over the years. But when I looked at them all I could think of was warning them about what was ahead. When I was a kid I would come here for summer vacations. Gran is who gave me my love of books. She wanted to retire and move to Florida. When she offered

me the store and it seemed to be the perfect way to jumpstart my life."

"Has it worked?"

She picked up her glass and gave him another wicked smile. "Well, things are definitely looking up."

"I'm glad you're here," he said.

"So am I."

The server brought their meals. Helen took a bite and smiled. "Oh, you're right. This is delicious."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Okay, your turn."

"There's really not much to say. Married too young, divorced after five years. Been practicing here for thirty years. You said you read the papers so you know I'm a defense attorney. About ten years ago I bought a ranch outside town. I don't get there often enough but I like it."

"Do you have horses?"

"Yeah, I do. Pegasus and Epona."

"Greek winged stallion and Celtic Horse goddess. Nice."

"Most people know Pegasus but not Epona."

"I'm not most people."

Josh smiled. "No, you are not."

"For instance most people won't know you've come to hate your job."

Josh stopped in mid bite.

Helen spoke quietly. "I know the look, Josh. I had the look. It's one of the reasons I stopped and watched you. It's what I do. I read people. I see what they're hiding. Some people see the fluffy bunny. I see the sharp teeth." She looked over at the hostess station. The woman greeted guests warmly and took them to their table. "That woman is very unhappy. Not with her job. She likes her job, alot. My guess is she hates what she's going home to."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Watch her face."

The hostess walked back to her station and the smile dropped off her face. She

closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Another couple came up to her station. This time Josh could tell the smile was forced.

"Wow. That's amazing."

"Yes and no. It means that all those little white lies people use to make other people or themselves happy don't work on me. That's why I'm so direct. I've found it's the easiest way for me to live. I say what I think and I mean what I say. Not everyone appreciates it."

She finished her dinner and set down her fork. "I'm sure you read people too. You probably can tell whether or not a client or a witness is telling the truth."

Josh nodded. "Over the years I've learned how to figure out what people aren't telling me." He leaned forward and took her hand. "For instance I can tell you're more nervous about this than you're letting on."

Helen blushed. "You are good."

"I'm nervous too."

They sat back as the server came for their dishes. "Desserts? We have the most amazing cake. It's called Death by Chocolate."

Josh laughed when Helen's eyes lit up. "We'll take two."

She tilted her head down a bit in the first shy move he'd ever seen her make. "I really like chocolate."

"What was the other reason?"

"For the cake?"

"No. You said it was one of the reasons you stopped to watch me. What was the other one?"

Helen smiled. "I really like your eyes."

Josh pulled up to Helen's house turned off the car. "I had a great time tonight, Helen. I'd like to do it again, soon."

"I had a great time too. I'd like to see you again." She leaned in and kissed him. The kiss grew passionate and intense. She stoked the fire in him. She pulled back and smiled. "My first instinct is to invite you in." She reached for his hand. "And I would want you to stay."

He kissed the palm of her hand and smiled. "I hear a 'but' coming."

"The truth is I am nervous. I've never let anyone get too close. You make me want to rethink that decision."

He gave her a soft kiss. "I'm nervous too. I haven't been in a relationship for a very long time." He gave her a little laugh. "And if I came in I would definitely want to stay."

Helen grinned. "Nice to know."

"I had planned to go to my ranch this weekend. Why don't you come with me. I have five bedrooms, you can take your pick. No pressure, I promise. We can go riding and relax. Get to know each other."

"I've never been on a horse."

"What? Why, you live in Texas now, woman," he said in a cute drawl. "Not riding? I do believe that's against the law."

Helen laughed. "Does that mean you'll teach me?"

He brushed her cheek with his hand and whispered, "I'd be delighted."

She gave him a soft kiss. "In that case, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Is eight too early? I like to get out there to ride before it gets too late in the day."

"Eight will be fine." She opened the door.

"Sweet dreams," he said.

"Oh, I have a feeling that's guaranteed."

Josh waited until she'd closed her front door behind her before he pulled out of her driveway. She leaned up against the door and sighed. She had a wonderful time with Josh. He was charming and funny. And the man was damn sexy. Those shoulders, the eyes, that cute drawl. It was all she could do not to invite him in. She had to be sure before she did. Getting involved with him was a risk. Would he understand? No one else ever had.

Josh stopped on the way to Helen's for some groceries and a couple of bottles of wine. Thank goodness for the all night market. Groceries, wine, call to Walter to tell him he was coming in and bringing a guest. He tried to keep his mind occupied with the details of the trip so he wouldn't over think what he was doing. The ranch was his refuge. The only place he could relax. He had never brought a woman to the ranch, not in ten years.

The women he'd dated over the last few years blended in his memory to one goal oriented career woman. Thin and well dressed, they were looking for a companion that made them look good. None of those things mattered to Helen. Josh knew Helen Trent didn't give a damn what people thought of her.

He knocked on her front door and smiled. She had on a t-shirt and jeans not to mention those damn sneakers. She looked him up and down and smiled.

"Howdy, cowboy."

He decided to play it up a bit. He touched the brim of his hat and nodded. "Howdy, ma'am." She chuckled and stepped aside for him to come inside.

"I haven't seen you in jeans before. Looks good," she whispered. She put her hand on his chest. "Before we go there is one thing I need to do."

"Sure. We have plenty of time."

"Good," she nodded before she slipped her hand up and around his neck and pulled him in for a deep kiss. "I didn't get a lot of sleep because I kept thinking about kissing you again."

"You too?" He smiled before he took her in his arms and gave her the kind of kiss he'd been dreaming about. The heat of just her kiss was intense. Holding her was like holding on to a bonfire. He pulled back and smiled. "We better get going or I'm not going to want to leave at all."

She picked up an overnight bag and a jacket. "Okay, I'm ready."

He took the bag from her as she locked up. It was light, probably only a few essentials. Any other woman he'd known would have had a rolling suitcase that weighed a ton.

"How long with it take to get to your ranch?"

"It's about an hour drive, but we have to make a stop first."

"You're in control of this bus," she said with a smile.

He shook his head. "Somehow, I seriously doubt that."

They pulled up in front of Curtis's Trading Post and parked. "We need to do something about those sneakers."

"What's wrong with my sneakers?"

"If I'm going to teach you to ride you need a pair of boots and you need a hat. Texas sun can be brutal."

The sound of the door chime announced their entrance. "Hey Mr. Morgan?" called a young girl in jeans and a plaid shirt with a blonde ponytail.

"Hey Cassie. How are you?"

"I'm good. Haven't seen you in a while."

"It's been a busy time. Cassie, I'm teaching Helen to ride this weekend so she's going to need a pair of boots and a hat."

"Sure thing." Cassie smiled at Helen. "Have a seat. Do you have anything in mind?"

"I don't have a clue. I've never worn cowboy boots."

Cassie shot Josh a look. He shrugged his shoulders. "Yankee."

She smiled and nodded. "Don't worry sweetie. I'll take care of you. What size?"

"Eight."

Cassie went into the back room and returned with a stack of boxes. She flipped open each box and set a boot on top.

Helen pointed to a pair of pink boots with white stitched designs. "Oh those are a non-starter. Too girly." She looked at Cassie and smiled. "I don't do girly." She tried on a pair brown boots with minimal decoration. She walked up and down and looked over at Josh. "What do you think?"

"They look great. Try on the black ones too."

"I only need one pair."

Josh and Cassie looked at each other and shook their heads. Both said, "Yankees."

Helen laughed. "Fine. I'll try on the black ones." She put her hands on her hips and did a model walk up and down the aisle. "Happy?"

"We'll take both," Josh told Cassie.

"What? No. I..."

Josh walked up close to Helen and said, "I'm buying you boots, woman. Now hush and try on some hats."

She grinned and held up her hands in surrender. "Fine. Bring 'em on, Cassie." Cassie brought out several but Helen pick a plain dark brown with a simple leather band. "What do you think?"

Josh smiled. What he really thought was she looked hot dressed up in boots and a hat. But he'd promised no pressure. "It's good. Try on the black one." She slipped on the black hat and smiled.

"What do you think, cowboy? Do I look Texan?" she said with a smile.

"Ah to hell with being in public," he thought. He walked over and tucked his finger under her chin. "You look beautiful, sweetheart." He gave her a gentle kiss. "We'll take them."

"Sure thing, Mr. Morgan."

When they got back into the car Helen leaned over and gave him a kiss. "Thank you for the presents."

"You're welcome."

"One question. How long do you think before everyone knows you kissed me in the middle of Curtis's Trading Post?"

He laughed as he backed his car out. "Before we are even out of the parking lot."

Josh had to admit he was proud to show off his home. He was delighted to see the pleasure in Helen's eyes. She looked around and gasped.

"How big is this place?"

"One hundred and fifty acres."

"How big?!"

Josh laughed. "That's not all that big for a ranch, or what was part of a cattle ranch. The owner died and his kids divided it up. I got the main house and the caretaker's house." He pointed to the west. "There's also a nice creek that runs through it about a twenty minute ride by horse that way."

"It takes twenty minutes to get to cross your property?"

"Just to get to the creek," he said. "I've ridden around it a couple of times checking

the fence. That takes better part of an afternoon."

Helen shook her head. "Unbelievable. It takes me two minutes to walk up and down my driveway. Twice."

Josh watched as she closed her eyes. A smile lit up her face. "Oh, the quiet," she sighed. "It's so peaceful here." She looked at him and smiled. "I don't know how you ever leave."

He studied her for a moment. She was genuinely taken with his home and he was surprised at how much that pleased him. "Come on. I want you to meet Walter and Emma, my caretakers."

The smell of coffee greeted them as he opened the front door. "Emma, we're here," he called.

A woman in her early forties with short brown hair and a big smile came out to greet them. "Hello. I'm Emma Simmons. I make sure this one eats something besides frozen dinners when he's here."

"It's nice to meet you, Emma. I'm Helen Trent," she said as she extended her hand.

"Oh, I know you," said Emma. "You own that great bookstore in town."

"I thought you looked familiar. Big regency fan, right?"

"That's me. Walter says we're going to have to build another room just for my library."

"Regency?" asked Josh

"Romance novels set in the early nineteenth century."

"Oh," he said with a smile.

"Don't you dare snicker, Joshua Morgan," said Helen. "Romance novels are a billion dollar business."

"How much?"

"Average romance reader reads one book a week as opposed to the rest of the buyers who average five a year. Women like Emma keep my store open."

Josh smiled. "Duly noted. Emma, I smell coffee."

"Brunch is almost done. You get settled and I'll get it ready."

Josh carried her bag upstairs and set it in the hall. He opened the door on at the end of a long hall. "This is my room." Helen walked in and looked around. He had a large

bed in a heavy dark wood frame. There were a few pictures, mostly western prints and what looked like a couple of photos that looked like him.

"Parents?" she asked. He nodded. She took another look around the room. "It looks like you," she smiled. "Unpretentious and all male."

Josh took a second to appreciate her smile. "Let me show you the other rooms. He opened the door next to his room. It was simple guest room done in lighter woods.

"I like it," she said. "It's not fussy." She walked to the window and pushed aside. She stood for a minute just looking. She closed her eyes and whispered, "Perfect." She turned to him and smiled. "You have a beautiful home."

"Thank you." He watch as she took another look out the window and smiled. She looked so natural, just standing there. She looked like she belonged."We should get downstairs before Emma yells at me for letting brunch get cold." Helen released the curtain and walked towards him. "Before we go back down. I promised no pressure and I meant it, it's just..." Good Lord. He felt like a green kid around her. She smiled at him and he found the words. "I really need to kiss you."

"Then I guess you better."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, trying to vent the passion that had been building inside him. It only blazed hotter. She held on tight and gave him control, letting him have what he needed. He pulled back and looked in her eyes. "My God," he whispered. He rested his forehead against hers, trying to regain his composure.

"Brunch is ready. Eggs are not good cold," Emma yelled from the bottom of the steps.

They both laughed and head toward the stairs. He watched as Helen walked down ahead of him, her ass looking so tempting in jeans. God help him. He was going to have a hell of a time keeping his promise.

Emma shooed them out of the kitchen so she could clean up they could go riding. Helen came back downstairs with her new brown boots and hat.

"Do I look sufficently cowgirl?"

Josh looked at her and smiled. What she looked like was a hot, sexy cowgirl.

"That'll do nicely," he said. He led her out to the barn, about two hundred yards from the house. It was a traditional structure, sliding stall doors, shutters inside and out so the horses can look outside on a nice day.

"Wow. I didn't realize it would be this big."

"When this was a working ranch they kept ten horses." They heard a horse making a racket and a man yelling. Josh ran into the open door to see a man trying to get close to a horse. The horse wasn't having it.

"Walter, what's going on?"

"Hey Josh. This is Abby, the rescue I told you about. They dropped her off this morning but I haven't been able to get close to her. I'm not sure what the hell I'm going to do."

Josh looked at Helen. "We have the room so we occasionally take in a rescued horse, surrendered or seized. Walter gets them ready for adoption, usually."

"Poor thing looks scared," she said.

"Abuse case. She's all scarred up. She was seized by the sheriff." He looked at Josh. "Honestly, I've tried everything. I can't get close to her."

"The people who dropped her off, were they women?"

"Yeah, why?"

Helen looked at them and shrugged. "Maybe she's afraid of men." She looked over at the horse and smiled. "Why don't I try?"

"Oh I don't know about that, Helen. You've never been around horses."

"That stall door looks pretty strong and you're both here. I'll be fine."

Walter looked at Josh. "I've tried everything."

Josh touched her shoulder. "Be careful."

"I will. You two stay here."

He watched as she paused and closed her eyes. She opened them and walked slowly toward Abby, speaking quietly.

"Hello Abby. My name is Helen." The horse snorted, still breathing heavily. "It's okay now sweetheart. You're safe now." The horse seemed to quiet a bit. She started to get close and Walter made a move to stop her. Josh grabbed his arm.

"Let her try."

She stood still in front of the horse for a moment, then slowly extended her hand. The horse flinched but didn't pull away from her. She touched her lightly. "Aren't you a pretty girl?"

Josh watched dumbfounded as Helen whispered to the horse. She started stroking her long nose. She leaned into the horse reaching around her to what looked like a hug. Instead of fighting it, the horse closed her eyes, looking like she was enjoying it. Helen stroked her neck and continued whispering to her. She stepped back and look over at Walter. "Do you have any apples?"

"What?"

"Don't horses like apples? I'd like to give her a treat."

"Yeah, I have a couple." He walked over to a small table and opened a bag. He sliced the apple in half and approached Helen slowly. She reached out and took a piece holding it for the animal. Abby took it from her and quickly ate it.

"You give her the other piece." She started talking to the horse in a normal tone while she pet her neck. "This is Walter. He's very nice. He will take good care of you." Walter held the apple in his open hand and the horse took it. Helen reached for his hand and placed it on Abby's nose. The horse didn't protest.

"I'll be damned," he said as he started stroking the horse's nose.

Helen smiled and walked toward Josh. She stopped in front of him and studied him. "What is it?"

"Helen, I've been around horses my whole life. I've never seen anything like that."

"I figured if she was afraid of men she might let me get close." She reached for his hand and smiled. "I do believe I was promised a riding lesson."

"This way." Josh led her to the other end of the barn, still confounded by what he'd just seen.

Josh saw Pegasus in his stall and called out to him. "Hey boy. I'm sorry I haven't been around. The horse pawed at his the ground and snorted. He laughed and pet his nose. "Pegasus I want you to meet Helen."

"Hello boy. You are a handsome fellow," she said. "Just like your owner." She reached her hand up. "May I?"

"Are you asking me or him?"

"Both of you."

He shook his head and laughed. "I'm fine with it. I'll bet he will be too."

Helen raised her hand slowly and set it on the horse's nose. She gently moved her hand up and down. "What a nice boy."

"When he wants to be. Epona's right over here." They walked over to the next stall. Epona seemed to be less interested in Josh's arrival.

"She's a beauty," said Helen. She reached her hand up and pet the horse's nose.

"I think first I'll take Pegasus out and show you a few things, then I'll put you on Epona. She's gentle. Shouldn't give you any problems."

Josh led the horse out of his stall and into the paddock. He demonstrated how to get on and off safely and how to make the horse move the way you want. Walt brought out Epona and helped Helen into the saddle. Josh watched as Helen bent over and whispered in her ear while petting her neck. They moved around the paddock, Josh following behind her. He wasn't surprised to see she was a natural in the saddle, not the way she talked to the horses.

"You think you're okay out in the field? Nothing too fancy. No yelling yee ha and taking off," he smiled.

Helen smiled. "I promise."

They went for a slow walk in the field for about thirty minutes. For most of the time they were quiet. "You doing okay?" he asked.

"I'm good, Josh. This is amazing."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, but you've clocked more than enough time for a beginner."

"Okay, I guess you're right."

They headed back to the paddock and Walter helped her down. "If you don't mind I'm going to run Pegasus for a few minutes."

Helen smiled. "I'm sure you'll both enjoy that."

Josh smiled and clicked his against the roof of his mouth. Pegasus knew the signal and turned back toward the field. He gave him the signal to open up and the horse quickly

complied.

It felt great to ride again. It had been far too long. He'd been working non-stop for weeks. The more he worked the less satisfied he became. Something had to change. But for right now all he wanted to think about was the beautiful woman waiting for him. He turned Pegasus and headed back. When he pulled up at the paddock Helen was sitting on the fence waiting for him.

"Have fun?" she asked

"It was great." He got off Pegasus and started leading him to his stall. "I need to take care of him. You can go back to the house if you want."

"No, I'd like to watch. If I'm going to ride again I should know how."

"Walter will take care of her like he did today."

"I didn't know how today. How will a horse ever get to trust me if I don't take care of her?" She stopped and in a rare moment, looked shy. "I'm sorry. I'm assuming. But I really would like to ride again."

"We'll have time tomorrow before we have to head back." He'd given women expensive gifts and never gotten as big a smile as she had now. He looked over at Walter putting his things together. "I'll take care of things from here. You can take off."

Josh brought Helen into the large stall and showed her the brushes and how to use them. They spent the next few minutes taking care of Pegasus and talking about horses. Once they finished he secured his horse and the stall.

"Can we check on Abby?" she asked.

"Sure thing, sweetheart."

They walked to the horse's stall and approached quietly. "Hello girl," she said. The horse flipped up her nose in greeting as Helen stroked her nose. Josh watched as Helen whispered to the horse and gave her a kiss on the nose. "She seems better," she smiled.

"Yeah, she does," he said. He took her hand in his. "You did great today with Abby and with riding."

"I had the best time." She gave him a wicked little smile. "You know what I especially enjoyed? Watching you gallop through the field." She slipped her arms around his waist. "Honestly," she whispered "Watching you ride was pretty much the hottest thing I've ever seen."

"Oh yeah," he smiled.

"Hell yeah," she said before giving him a kiss.

He pulled her close and deepened the kiss. He rubbed his hands to her back and cupped her ass. He placed kisses on her neck, tasting and losing himself in her soft moans. He brushed a loose strand behind her ear. "Sweetheart," he whispered. "I should shower. I smell like horse and sweat."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Josh laughed. "Ah, sweetheart." He stroked her cheek. "Let's go back to the house and clean up. I've got some steaks and a bottle of wine."

"That sounds great."

Josh and Helen finished up the dinner dishes together. He refilled their glasses and headed out to the living room. "Let's get comfortable. We could watch a movie, if you like."

She sat on the couch and winced.

"Sore?"

"A little but the wine's helping," she said with a smile.

"Turnaround," he said. She set her glass and turned her back to him. He put his hands on her shoulders and began to work the muscles. "Riding can make you sore if you're not used to it."

"Ummm," she moaned. "That feels good."

Josh took some pillows off the couch and threw them on the floor. "Lay down and I'll work on your back." Helen laid face down as Josh positioned himself over her. He began working her back and down her spine. He looked at her lovely round ass and reminded himself of his promise. "How's that?" he asked with a slightly shaky voice.

"Heaven," she whispered.

He began to work the muscles in her legs when he stopped. "Sweetheart, I need to stop now if I'm going to keep my promise to you." Helen rolled on her back and smiled. "You did keep your promise. I've had a perfect day." She put her hand on his chest. "With a very sexy cowboy."

Josh snickered. "Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah," she said as she reached for him, pulling him close.

He kissed her with a passion he hadn't felt in years, maybe ever. He slipped his down her body, caressing her, pulling her tight against him. He placed kisses down her neck, tasted, nipped.

"Josh"

"Uh huh?" he said, preoccupied with the feeling of cupping her breast in his hand.

"Would you mind if we didn't use two bedrooms?"

He looked at her and smiled. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He stood and reached for her hand, pulling her to her feet. He stroked her cheek and gave her a soft kiss, then led her upstairs.

Josh closed his door and smiled. Helen walked toward him and slipped her hands around his neck. "I told you how painfully direct I am."

He nodded as he caressed her back.

"The truth is I'm nervous as hell. Nervous to take a chance on this, on us."

"So am I," he said. "But when I look at your smile, your beautiful eyes I know somehow we're going to be good." He gave her a soft kiss and whispered, "Tell me what you need."

"You," she said. "I need you."

The passion they'd both reined in broke loose. Desperation overwhelmed logic. He slid his hands under her t-shirt and pulled it over her head. His breath caught at the swell of the breasts. "So beautiful," he said as he caressed her. He caught a wicked look in her eyes.

"My turn." She pulled his t-shirt up and over his head. He smiled when he heard her gasp. "Even better than I thought," she whispered. She ran her hands over his chest and down his arms. She touched and kissed as she explored. She replaced her hands with her tongue.

"Christ," he hissed through clenched teeth. He pulled her to him in a desperate kiss as he pushed her toward the bed. She looked at him with the wicked smile that had been

driving him insane. She undid her jeans and he slipped them down her legs. He took a moment to look at her, pale ivory skin, dark black hair, blue eyes that had gone from pale to dark with passion. Something familiar tickled at the back of his memory. She held out her hand to him.

"Josh," she whispered. She reached for his jeans and unzipped them. He pulled them off along with his boxers. He did the same with her bra and panties.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he covered her with his body. He slipped down her body kissing and tasting as he went. He rubbed his hands down her thighs. "Are they still sore?"

"They're getting better," she said.

He kissed her inner thighs. "How about now?"

"Better," she gasped.

"How about now?" he said before he took her in his mouth.

"God, yes," she moaned and she writhed under him.

He lost himself in her, in the taste of her, until she flew apart calling for him. He rose above her as she raised her legs around his waist.

"I need you," she whispered. She cried out when he drove inside her. Her moans and pleas drove him to ride hard until he finally lost his last shred of control.

He rested on top of her, still inside her, unable to move. "My God," he whispered. He gave her a soft kiss. He saw pleasure in her eyes but there was something else. Like an image you see out of the corner of your eye before it's gone.

Helen listened to Josh's soft breathing. Being curled up next to him was as good as she'd felt in years. She smiled when she looked over at his chest. He had broad shoulders and strong muscular arms. His legs were amazing, probably from all those years of riding. Looking at him like this she did not think lawyer. He was a cowboy. She hoped he'd be her cowboy. For now she didn't want to think about anything beyond right now. Now she just wanted to enjoy what they had. She brushed her hand over his chest, not able to resist the definition.

"Mmmm. You're not asleep."

"No," She kissed his neck. "I'm not asleep." She nipped at his shoulder. She looked

at him and grinned. She slipped out of bed and grabbed Josh's hat off the dresser and put it on. "Do I make a good cowgirl?" she asked as she straddled his waist. He held on to her hips.

"You are an excellent cowgirl. A real natural in the saddle."

"Oh, yeah?" she smiled and she leaned down and kissed him. She started slipping down his body. She explored him with her hands, lips, tongue. She tasted all of him until she finally took him in her mouth. His moans drove her to intensify her movements until she knew neither one could take any more. She straddled him again, taking him in. She started with a slow ride, holding on to his hat and smiling. She moved to a fast trot and quickly to full gallop. The power she had in that moment drove them both over the edge. She collapsed on his shoulder trying to catch her breath.

"You're amazing," he whispered and gave her a sweet kiss.

She smiled. "Yee hah."

The both had a fit of laughing until he rolled her over on her back, reclaiming his hat.

The next few weeks were some of the happiest times in Helen's life. During the week they were in town. They'd go to dinner or order out alternating between their homes. Each weekend they would drive to the ranch and ride. She got to spend some time with Abby who seemed to be doing well. When Walter said she was good with horses she took it as a great compliment.

Their time alone amazing. Josh had the enthusiasm of youth mixed with the skill of experience. Everything should be perfect.

Helen hit the contact picture on her cell phone.

"What's wrong?"

"Hello to you too, Gran."

"Hello, angel. Now, what's wrong?"

"Can't I just call you to say I love you?"

"This is me, Helen. I know you better than anyone."

Damn. Sometimes she wished she could get something past her grandmother. She never had and it was clear she never would. She took a breath. "I've met someone."

"Tell me." Gran was just as direct as Helen.

"His name is Joshua Morgan. He's a lawyer. He also has a ranch outside of town. He's taught me to ride."

"Are you spending a lot of time with him?"

"Yes. It's been wonderful."

"You're in love with him."

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Is he in love with you?"

"I think he is, Gran."

"But you haven't told him yet."

"No. I don't know what to do, Gran."

"Yes you do. You've haven't called me for advise, angel. You've called me to talk it out. You know what you have to do. Sooner or later he'll find out. It's better if it's sooner."

"What if it's too much for him, Gran? I don't want to lose him."

"It's better if you find out now."

"You're right, Gran."

The old woman laughed. "Of course I am. I'm old. I know stuff."

Helen laughed.

"Sweetheart you know where to find me if you need me."

"I'll always need you, Gran. I love you."

"I love you too, angel."

Josh sat in his office going over his cases. He'd been purposely lightening his caseload over the last few weeks. He'd stopped taking every case. The more time he could spend with Helen, the better. They saw each other almost every night and he lived for the Friday evening drives to the ranch. Helen was the most natural rider he'd ever seen. She'd gone from beginner to a competent horsewoman in only a few weeks. The horses followed her every direction without hesitation. Their nights were some of the most passionate times he'd ever known. So what the hell was nagging him? He tried to tell himself he was imagining things, finding problems were there weren't any.

Dolores knocked on his office door before opening it. "Vet's office just called. Wanted to let you know they'd meet you at the ranch on Saturday for the horse's check up. They said to tell you Epona's due for a followup on that dental issue she had."

"Okay, thanks."

"What kind of name is Epona?" she asked.

"Epona was a Celtic goddess, a protector of horses."

Dolores shrugged as she walked back to her desk. "What ever happened to naming a horse, Daisy or Lulubell."

He shook his head and laughed. "Epona is an excellent name. Look it up." He paused and repeated softly, "Look it up, Look it up," He pulled the website he used to find Epona's name. He paged through the images until he found it. Morrigan, celtic goddess of war. She was depicted in all the drawings with long black hair, pale skin and crystal blue eyes. Helen.

Josh knocked on Helen's door at seven with a bottle of wine for dinner. He was still shaken by what he'd seen but he tried to tell himself that it was just an illustration. Helen

smiled when she let him in but he saw it was forced.

He handed her the wine. "I got that cabernet you liked at Pandora's."

"Thank you. That was very thoughtful."

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Kiss me, Josh," she whispered.

He took her in his arms and kissed her, but felt her anxiety. It was a desperate passion. "What's going on?"

She sat down on the couch and he joined her. "You're scaring me," he said.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"Helen, are you ending it?"

She gave him another sad smile. "Josh, believe me. I want nothing more than for us to continue. But if we're going to you'll need to know something about me. After you do, well, you may decide to walk away."

He took her hand in his. "I can't imagine that happening."

She shook her head and smiled. "Hold that thought." She sighed and took a breath. He suddenly felt like she was a client about to confess to something he didn't want to know.

"Remember when I told you I could read people, like you do. Body language, facial expressions, I can tell if someone is being honest or if they're hiding something."

He nodded.

"I can do more than that. I can see deeper. I can see what people are thinking."

"Are you saying you're a mind reader?"

"That's a very simplistic term for it. It's much more complicated. It's not like I see words, like I'm reading a book. I see images. I can feel what they're feeling."

"Helen, I don't know what to say to you right now."

"Don't say anything. Just let me finish. You need to understand all of it. It started when I was little. The earliest memories where when I was four or five years old. It was fine then. I could feel how much my Mom loved me." She smiled at the memory. "When Dad looked at Mom I could feel how he adored her. But trust me, seeing inside someone is almost never like that. Try explaining to an eight year old why Dad's best friend wants to get her alone to touch her."

"Oh God," he whispered. He watched as Helen stared straight ahead.

"My Gran has it so my mother knew what was happening. It always skips a generation and it's always a female. One of my niece's daughters will mostly have it. That's why my parents would send me here every summer. Gran helped me learn to control it. Imagine walking through a neighborhood with no curtains on the windows. You can see inside, whether you want to or not. To me, everyone was a window with no curtain. It became physically painful to go anywhere. You can't imagine the noise of all those thoughts and emotions bombarding you from all directions. Gran taught me how to construct a mental wall to keep the noise to a minimum. It's exhausting to keep it up. When I'm tired or it's too crowded I can't shield myself. Sometimes a person's energy is so strong it punches through my defenses." She looked at him with unshed tears. "That's why I had to tell you. I would never be able to keep up this wall twenty four seven. Sooner or later something would happen. I would say or do something and you would know something's very different with me."

He stared at her not knowing what to think, what to believe.

"You don't believe me."

"What..I.."

"No I didn't read you. I can tell from the look on your face. But I can see you'll need proof."

"I want to believe you but I've never believed in these things."

Helen leaned back against the sofa. "Think about something, anything we haven't been discussing."

He nodded and tried to think of something generic. He wondered if he set his coffeemaker for the morning. He watched as she closed her eyes and took a breath. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"You want a cup of coffee? Now?"

Josh could feel his heart speed up. This couldn't be real.

"You think it was a lucky guess." She shooked her head. "Think of something I can't possibly know."

"Helen, I.."

"Just do it, Josh."

He took a deep breath and looked at Helen. He thought of the image he'd seen earlier. The ethereal goddess.

She looked confused, like she was squinting to see something clearly. "What is that? What am I seeing? It's me, but it's not me."

"Holy Christ," he whispered.

"You believe me."

"I believe you."

"What was I looking at?"

"Morrigan"

"Celtic goddess of war." She smiled at his surprise. "I know who she is. I've spent most of my life hiding in books. Gran gave me my love of books. In them I can absorb the beauty of thought without it causing me pain."

"Do you know why that illustration would look so much like you?"

"Actually, it's not as odd as you might think. Gran and I did a lot of research into what this is. We traced it back until there were no more written records. We stopped in the late sixteenth century, in Ireland. Myths and legends are all built on a grain of truth. Black hair and light blue eyes is unusual, even in Ireland. If someone was born with my coloring and my ability, they could have assumed she was magical."

"This is why you love being at the ranch. It's isolated and quiet."

Helen smiled. "It's so peaceful there. I can completely relax." She took another breath. "That's not all of it."

"More?" He couldn't believe they were having this conversation.

"Most of the time I'm a receiver. I get impressions from others. With some people, if they are open, I can be a transmitter."

"Excuse me?"

"I can do it easily with Gran. We've practiced for years. With some people I can transmit images to them."

Josh stared at her, not believe what he was hearing. It was all so bizarre, like with the horses. "Is that how you were able to calm Abby?"

Helen smiled and nodded. "Animals are very open, instinctual beings. I sent Abby images of being fed and cared for and safe. I attached those images to images of you

and Walter and Emma so she would associate those things with all of you."

"I have to ask," he started.

"No. Other than what I just did here, I've never used this on you."

"But that day at Rose's?"

"It was just as I said." She looked at him at the tears she'd held back finally fell. "I saw a handsome cowboy with beautiful eyes who looked so alone."

"Helen, I don't..."

"Stop Josh. I know. I can feel your doubt. I can see you're wondering if this is the end." Her voice hitched. "You should go." She stood and walked to the door. "You need to figure this out for yourself. When you do, you know how to find me. You've done it before." She held open the door and he stared at her for a moment, not really sure what he wanted to do. "Please, Josh," she whispered. "Just go."

He stood on the front step as she closed the door behind him. What the hell had just happened? He heard Helen sobbing through the door. His first thought was to go to her. Instead, he turned around and got in his car.

Josh flipped through case files but the words were a blur. The only thing on his mind for the last three days was the last time with Helen. That conversation turned every thing he knew upside down. His wonderful, funny, beautiful girlfriend could read minds. He'd barely slept thinking about her, wondering how he could get past this Mt. Everest of relationship hurdles. The knock at his office door annoyed the crap out of him.

"What?!"

"Well, I'd say you'd gotten up on the wrong side of the bed, but from the look of you, I'd say you haven't slept."

Josh looked up to see John standing at his door. The sheriff didn't look like he'd slept much either. "I'm sorry, John. I've had a rough couple of days. What's up?"

John sat down in a chair and sighed. "Bad case."

"Can you talk about it?"

"Yeah. It's already hit the papers. It's the rape case."

"The girl they found behind Curtis's?"

John nodded. "Josh, it's Cassie."

"Ah, shit," he said as he leaned back in his chair.

She's still in a coma. We don't have a thing to go on. The security camera's were destroyed. Without Cassie as a witness, I've got nowhere to even start. Whatever she knows is inside her head. The doctors have no idea when she'll come out of it, if ever."

Josh looked at his friend and realized there was one thing that might help. Or rather, one person. "John, do you trust me?"

"What? That's a hell of a question."

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course. I've known you most of my life. What is this about?"

"I may know someone who can help. Wait for me at the hospital and I'll text you as soon as I'm on my way."

"Josh, this better be good. Cassie's parents are a mess. I don't want to give them false hope."

"Just get to the hospital and will talk about when I get there."

Helen was waiting on a customer and smiling but she looked at tired as he felt. Apparently he wasn't the only one not sleeping. When he walked through the door a smile flashed across her face and disappeared just as quickly.

"Becky, watch the floor," Helen said and walked toward the back room, just like she had that first day. He followed her in and closed the door.

"What do you want, Josh?"

"I'm sorry I haven't called. I've been..well..I'm handling this badly."

"Cut to the chase. Why are you here?"

He couldn't help his small smile. Helen was always straight to the point. "Did you hear about the girl they found behind Curtis's Trading Post?"

She nodded. "It was in the paper this morning. She's unconscious."

"She's in a coma. Helen, it's Cassie."

"Oh God. That sweet girl who picked out my boots and hats?"

"Yeah. She was raped."

Helen steadied herself against her desk. "Why are you coming to me with this?"

"John has nothing to go on. The only one who knows what happened is in a coma."

"You want me to read her. So suddenly you're not afraid of me anymore."

"I'm sorry, Helen. This whole thing threw me. Scream at me if you want but John is desperate for a lead. Will you help?"

She shook her head and grabbed her purse. "Of course I'll help. Let's go."

Josh walked Helen up to the ICU waiting area. John and Cassie's parents were waiting for them. John stood and walked forward.

"Josh, what's going on?"

Josh closed the door behind him. "Helen, this is Jamie and Sam Curtis, Cassie's parents. This is Helen Trent. She may be able to help."

"How?" whispered Jamie.

Helen sat and took a breath. "I can read people, see what they're thinking. I've never done it on an unconscious person but I might be able to see what she saw. I may be able to give you a suspect."

"This is bullshit," said Sam. He looked at Josh. "How could you bring her here?"

"Sam, please give her a chance and listen," said Josh.

"I know this is a terrible tragedy for all of you and I am not here to add to it. I'm not doing this for publicity. In fact I will ask that you never tell anyone about me."

Josh put his hand on Helen's back. She looked at him and he nodded. "You know what you need to do."

"I don't blame you for being skeptical. You're going to need proof. Mrs. Curtis, I want you to think of something I can't possibly know."

"What?" She looked at her husband. "Sam?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Curtis you have no reason in the world to trust me. You don't know me, but you know Josh. Joshua Morgan is a good, honest man. He's spent his whole career helping people who needed him. He brought me here because he thinks I can help you. I don't know if I can but I'm willing to try. Are you willing to try?"

Jamie nodded. "Okay. What should I do?"

"Try to relax and focus on that one thing." Helen closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened her eyes and looked at Jaime. "You're wondering where Cassie's cross is. She always wears it and it's gone."

What little color that had been in Jaime's face drained away. "Oh my God," she whispered.

"Jaime, honey. What is it?" asked Sam.

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

Josh saw the look on everyone's face and understood the reason why Helen would never tell anyone about her ability.

"I don't know if I can help but it won't hurt her."

"We'll go with you," said Sam.

"No. It's hard enough with one person. All your emotions will mix with hers. I won't be able to tell what I'm seeing."

"I don't know," said Sam.

"Josh, give me your phone," said Helen. She took it and activated his FaceTime app, ringing her phone. She opened it on her phone and showed the Curtis's. "You can watch me."

Sam nodded. "Okay. We'll do anything to find this bastard."

Helen turned to Josh. "Take me to her."

Josh looked at her parents. "What room?"

"405," said Jaime.

Josh led her two doors down from the waiting room. As she reached for the handle Josh stopped her. "Be careful, sweetheart." He watched as she closed the door behind her.

Helen walked into Cassie's room but barely recognized her. Her face was swollen and bruised. She was connected to tubes attached to machines. All she saw of Cassie was her honey blonde hair.

She pulled a rolling tray over Cassie's waist and propped up her phone. "Can you see me?" she asked.

"Yes, we see you," Josh answered.

She closed her eyes and took a breath. She knew this would be the hardest read she'd ever done. But she had to try. "Cassie. Cassie, it's Helen Trent. Remember me? You picked out my boots and my hats for me." She reached for Cassie's hand and began talking to her without words.

"Cassie, I need you to talk to me. You need to show me who did this to you. We want to catch him. Stop him. Show me Cassie, please."

Helen pushed herself deep to find Cassie's thoughts. They were deeper than anything she'd ever encountered. "Show me. I need to see."

Pictures began flashing in front of her. Black hair. A red plaid shirt. The back room of the store. It wasn't just pictures. Cassie's emotions flooded through Helen's brain and her heart started to race. Finally she found the center of Cassie's thoughts. She wasn't just with Cassie, she was Cassie. Helen felt her fear, the pain of being beaten. Her instinct was to pull away to protect herself but she couldn't, not until she saw the face. "Show me, Cassie." Terror poured through her as she felt what Cassie felt as she was being raped. She saw his face. Young, handsome and evil. A black fog enveloped her and Helen collapsed.

Josh had been watching when he saw Helen fall out of the frame. He bolted out of the waiting room and ran to Cassie's room. Helen was sprawled on the floor, blood pouring from her nose. "Helen!" He turned to John. "Get help."

"Helen, sweetheart. Wake up. Please baby, wake up."

A nurse ran into the room. She saw the blood and grabbed gloves and a gauze from a drawer. "Let me in," ordered the nurse.

Another nurse came in the door, pushing the frightened bystanders aside.

"Get me a BP cuff."

The second nurse came back and handed the cuff to the nurse on the floor. She took Helen's pressure and listened through her stethoscope. "Shit." She looked at the other nurse. "Get Doctor Price. Now!" She looked at Josh. "Can you pick her up?" He lifted her in his arms. "Follow me." The nurse led them to an empty bed in the room across the hall. He set her down and the nurse raised the foot of the bed as high as it would go.

"What's going on?" demanded Josh.

"Her blood pressure is dangerously high."

A man Josh assumed was Dr. Price ran in. "What's going on?"

"Collapsed while visiting a patient. Severe nosebleed. BP was two ten over one twenty about three minutes ago."

Josh's heart raced. He knew how bad that was.

Dr. Price examined Helen, listened to her heart. He forced each eye open and flashed a light into each. "Are you the husband?"

"No, but she's the love of my life."

"Just tell him, Emmett," said John.

He looked over his shoulder to see John and the Curtis's standing in the doorway.

"Her pressure is dangerously high. We need to bring it down fast or she could have a stroke." Price took her pressure again. "Better, but still too high." He gave the nurse orders for a medication. "She needs to stay calm and we'll keep a close eye on her."

The nurse returned and set up an IV in Helen's arm. She injected the tube with a syringe and set up a pulse and pressure monitor to take her pressure every ten minutes.

"What's her name?" asked Price.

"Helen Trent," said Josh

"Helen, can you hear me? Helen I need you to wake up."

Helen began to stir. "Josh?"

"I'm here, baby." He reached for her hand.

She looked around the room. "What happened?"

"You passed out."

"Helen," said Price. You had a sudden and very high spike in your blood pressure. I've given you something to lower your blood pressure and I'm getting you a sedative."

"No!" The machines started beeping.

"Helen, you need to calm down," said Price.

"You're not giving me anything until I talk to them. It's important."

He gave an exasperated sigh. "I can see there's no stopping you. Keep it short."

Price walked out of the room.

Helen waved everyone over to her.

"Did you see something?" asked Jaime.

"Yes. She knows him."

"What?" said her parents.

"Do you have any pictures of her and her friends?"

"I have Cassie's phone."

"Let me see it." Janie pulled a phone in a bright pink case out of her purse and handed it to Helen. She took the phone and started scrolling through pictures until she saw him. It was a picture of Cassie with several of her friends. She had her arms around the waist of a young boy with blonde hair. The machines started beeping again.

"Helen, please baby. You need to stay calm."

"It's him." She handed the phone to John.

"What? That's her boyfriend Eddie. I kill him," he shouted as he tried to go out the door. John put a hand on his chest and stopped him.

"Nobody's killing anybody."

"No, no," Helen said as she reached for the phone again. She used her fingers to center and enlarge the picture. "This is the guy."

"Holy Christ," said Josh. "Mickey Grant."

"Are you sure?" ask John.

"Yes. He was so angry with her. He wanted her dead."

"I'll bring him in," said John.

"You don't have probable cause. If you arrest him without it the entire case will be thrown out," said Josh.

"I didn't say I'd arrest him. I'll ask him nicely as one of Cassie's dearest friends to come in and help us. I'll give him a phony photo line up to look at." He turned to the Curtis's. "I'll get him. Promise me you let me do it the right way."

"I'll hold you to it John," said Sam.

"John," Helen called. "He has her cross."

The sheriff got a big smile. "Thank you, Helen. Thank you very much."

Jaime moved to Helen's bedside and took her hand. "I don't know how you did what you did, but I'm very grateful."

"You're welcome," she whispered.

Josh was finally alone with her. She was still deathly pale but the numbers were slowly dropping. "What happened in there?"

"I don't know. I've never had to dig so deep for a memory."

"You did it. You gave them the lead they needed. I'm going to let you get some sleep." Helen started sobbing. "Sweetheart, what is it."

"She's not dreaming." The machines started a warning beep.

"What are you talking about?"

"She not dreaming. For her, it's still happening. She's living it over and over. She's trapped in a nightmare."

"How do you know?"

She gasped for air. "I felt it. Everything he was doing, every punch, everything." Josh ignored the blaring alarms and wrapped his arms around her as she sobbed. "I swear to you. We'll get him."

Price ran back into her room with a syringe. "That's it. Whatever you have to say will have to wait. Helen, I'm giving you something for the pain and to help you sleep. He injected the tube with the syringe. Within seconds her eyes began to flutter and then closed.

Josh grabbed Price's arm. "What do you mean the pain? Since when is high blood

pressure painful?"

"It's not but the accompanying migraine is. From what I saw when I examined her eyes I guarantee hers hurts like a son of a bitch. Frankly, I surprised she could talk to you at all." He put his hand on Josh's shoulder. "She's going to be out for hours. Go home and get some rest."

"I'm staying."

"Both of you are stubborn as mules."

Josh managed a small smile.

Josh had his feet propped up on another chair and tried to nap without success. He gone through Helen's purse to find her insurance card and gave the nurse as much information about Helen as he had. Her numbers had fallen well within normal range. His stomach started to growl. He looked at his watch and realized it was past seven p.m. Helen had been asleep for nearly eight hours. "Good," he thought. "The more sleep the better." He was about to call for some food when John walked through the door. He was wearing a very big smile.

"We got him."

"That's great. How?"

"He came in willingly. He ID'd a photo of someone who'd been hanging around her at the store. Will Springer."

"Wait. Didn't he die in prison?"

"Last year. I asked him to tell me if he'd been with her the night of the attack, just so we could fill in the timeline, of course."

"Of course," Josh smiled.

"Then I faked a call from the hospital. Told Mickey the good news. Cassie was waking up. He folded like a cheap suit. I got a warrant, searched his car and his house."

"Oh I bet Daddy is pissed with you."

"Big time. That is until we found Cassie's cross in his bedroom. The camera's may have not recorded the attack but it recorded everything up to it."

"She was wearing the cross."

John smiled. "Yes she was."

Josh shook his hand. "Great job."

John nodded toward Helen. "She's the one we need to thank. I don't know how the hell she did it but I'm sure glad she did. How's she doing?"

"Better," they heard her whisper.

Josh looked at Helen and smiled. Her color was better and her numbers had been good for a few hours. "John got him. Mickey is under arrest."

Helen smiled. "Oh that's great news." She started to sit up.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I have to tell her."

"Like hell. Your last trip nearly killed you. I won't let you do it again."

"Josh, I have to. I'm the only one who can."

"Okay, I'm going to let you two sort this out. I just wanted to let you know. Thank you, Helen."

"You're welcome, sheriff."

She tried to stand but her legs were shaky.

"Helen, no. You can't."

"I have to and I'm going to. So either help me or get the hell out of my way."

"Damn it, woman. You really are as stubborn as a mule. Fine. Hold on to my arm." He walked her across the hall to Cassie's room.

Helen stood at the side of her bed and held on to the rails. She took a breath and closed her eyes. She prayed she wouldn't have to go too deep. She began speaking to her without words.

"Cassie, it's me again. Helen. I came back to tell you they got him. You did it. You told me what I needed to know. Mickey was arrested. You're safe now. You can come back." An image formed in front of her. It was Cassie the day she'd met her. She was smiling. Helen opened her eyes and smiled. "She'll be okay now. She knows she's safe." With that her knees buckled. This time Josh was there to catch her.

"Damm it. I told you this was too much."

"It's not Cassie, it's everyone else. I'm not strong enough yet to keep my defenses in place. Things are coming at me from all sides. You need to get me out of here."

"Okay. I'm going to find the doctor and get you discharged."

It took some doing but Josh managed to get Price to release her on the provision that she rest for a few days. He gave her a prescription which Josh had stopped and filled.

"Thank you for taking care of me," she said.

He looked over and saw she was laying as far back as the passenger seat would recline and her eyes were closed.

"Once I get home I'll be fine. And you can finally get something to eat. I can hear your stomach growling from here."

Josh smiled. "I'll get something at home."

"I have some leftovers in the fridge. You can help yourself."

"I'm not taking you to your home."

Her eyes snapped open. "What? Why?"

"I'm taking you to the ranch. Can you think of a better place for you to recover?"

"You don't have to do this. What happened wasn't your fault."

He looked at her and smiled. "Will you please listen, woman. I will be taking care of you. Nobody else." He could see she was fighting a smile. "What about court?"

"Nothing on the docket until next week."

"Fine," she said pretended to be relenting. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"How's the head?"

"Much better. Still a little trace of one but I've had worse."

They got to the ranch and went straight upstairs. Helen tried to go into the guest bedroom but he stopped her. "Not a chance," he whispered. He took her into his bedroom and sat her on the edge of the bed, then sat next to her. "Helen, this time I want you to just listen to me. I admit this whole thing threw me for a loop and I handled it badly. Watching you today, putting yourself at risk the way you did reminded me how extraordinary you are." He gave her a tender kiss. "I could say things right now and I guarantee I won't say it right. Would you be safe for you to read me?"

She smiled. "It should be. Are you sure you want me to?"

"Absolutely sure."

"Okay. Relax and think about what you want me to see."

Josh relax and thought of nothing but Helen. Her smile, her laugh, her terrific round ass. He heard her giggle. She must have seen that. He thought how magnificent she was riding. How amazing it was when they made love. He remembered on Saturday morning as she came down the stairs looking so beautiful. He'd realized she was everything he'd ever wanted. He was in love with her. She gasped and he opened his eyes. Tears were running down her face.

"I love you too," she whispered.

"Sweetheart, I can't promise that your ability won't disturb me from time to time. I can promise that I will do my best. I promise, no matter what, I will always love you.

"Josh, I love you so much."

"I do have one request. Do you think you could try that transmission thing on me?" He reached for her hand. "I want to know what it's like."

"I'll try. It doesn't always work, but if you're open to it I have a chance."

"Please, sweetheart. I want to know."

"Okay, close your eyes. Think of that section of field just off the barn. Where you can see the fields go on forever. Go there."

Josh closed his eyes and took himself there. It was cool there sometimes because of the shade from the barn. He saw something in the distance. Someone. Helen. She was walking toward him dressed in her cowgirl gear. He smiled as she got close to him. She reached for his hand and put it on her heart. "Oh God," he whispered. He was overwhelmed with emotions. Emotions that weren't his own. Passion, devotion, so many emotions he couldn't identify them all. It was enormous. It was her love for him. He opened his eyes and she was smiling. He started to cry. "My God, I can't describe what just happened. but I don't have to, do I?"

"No. I understand."

He pushed the tears off his face. "I want you, I need you in my life, always. Forever. Marry me." he said.

"Yes," she whispered.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her with an urgent need to show her how much he loved her . He leaned her back against the pillows and caressed her face. He smiled, knowing the he'd never be able to show how much he loved her. But now, he had

the rest of his life to try.