

The Reluctant Bride

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Prologue

"So this is it." His voice was deep and gravelly, but deceptively bland. Marissa knew better. He was anything but bland. Kane stuffed his big fists into the pockets of his sweats, stance stiff; face set as he partially blocked her departure with his formidably muscular body. He couldn't help it. If she left, she would be carrying his still beating heart in her fine, slender fingers. It had always been that way, although he'd fought the sensual, emotional bonds that pulled him to her when they were younger with everything he had up until they had rediscovered each other a year and a half ago. Even as she was walking out the door, he'd still be rock hard and ready to love her, any which way he could.

Marissa clutched the handle of her suitcase until her knuckles were white, trying to avoid looking at him but not succeeding very well. This was a lot harder to do than she thought, although she knew it was the right thing. She was completely unable to give him what he demanded. He was so damned overwhelming, standing there with his jaw clenched, fists balled, as if he would physically fight her to keep her tied to him with loving bonds she had no defense against. Six foot four of fierce determination, rock solidly sure that she belonged with – and to – him. Rissa met those clear blue eyes for one of the last times, noting the new, fine lines around them, and the bleak defeat in their depths. It was painfully hard to swallow around the huge lump in her throat, which corresponded to the agonizing ache in her heart. "Yes," she said, soft, weak, throaty. If she said anything more, she'd dissolve into a puddle of tears on the floor in front of him.

"I –" his hand reached out to her, but it, like his voice, dropped off. He hadn't been able to find the right combination of words that would keep her here where she belonged. An angry breath blew out of his mouth in frustration.

"It really is better this way," she flat out lied, pushing past him, careful not to touch him in any way.

Rissa, the only woman he'd come anywhere near loving in his forty-some-odd-years, blithely closed the door behind her with a frightening finality. He heard the car door slam and the roar of the engine as she drove away without him, and without so much as a backward glance.

His future looking bleaker than he could ever have imagined, Kane headed for the wet bar to drink himself into blessed oblivion, although even hours later, he could still torture his heart with every little memory of loving Rissa.

Chapter One

He'd run into her, literally, as he was coming in the door of the family ranch house a year and a half ago. She was backing her way out while still looking over her shoulder and talking to his mother, until her butt smacked up against a truly unyielding wall of man-flesh. Kane responded to her nearness as he always had, by becoming instantly and uncomfortably hard. Marissa Davidson was like a lit match to his gasoline. It had been that way ever since he could remember, although he never seemed to get around to doing anything about it.

Rissa almost stumbled, but Kane's strong arms righted her before she took a header off the front porch. "Thank you," she mumbled, reclaiming her arm as if he'd bitten it and beating a hasty retreat to the relative safety of her silver Celica.

He touched the tip of his hat politely, then doffed it entirely when he entered the kitchen. "Hello, Kane, dear," his mother greeted, and he kissed her dutifully on the cheek while making a half-hearted try at getting a fingerful of frosting from the bowl in front of her. What he got instead, as always, was the back of his hand rapped sharply with the rubber spatula she was using to scrape the bowl. The familiar by-play was practically a family tradition.

He couldn't resist asking, "What was she doing here?"

"She, dear?" Sarah asked, pretending innocence.

"Marissa Davidson, Mother," he sighed heavily, his tone letting her know he knew exactly what she was up to.

"Oh, that she."

Kane tucked his chin to his chest and issued a warning. "Mother."

A broad grin settled over Sarah's face. "You sound just like your father, Kane Alexander."

"Don't try to change the subject."

"What subject?"

Kane tapped his fingers on the countertop impatiently.

"Oh. That subject." She finished frosting the cake and wiped off her hands on her ever-present apron. "She just came over to make sure I was okay. To see if there was anything I

needed. And to talk." She stood purposefully in front of her forty-two-year-old, unmarried son. "I like her."

He had heard those words before, in just that "when-are-you-finally-going-to-settle-down-and-give-me-some-grandchildren" wistful tone. It made him roll his eyes and groan out loud.

Five foot nothing Sarah smacked her irascible mountain of a son sharply on the shoulder as she busied herself cleaning up the kitchen. "No, no. I'm not going to throw that one at you, Kane. You can rest assured about that."

A bushy black eyebrow rose at that unique confession. "And why not, pray tell? She looked like just the type you usually package up for me with an apple in her mouth – under sixty, female and still breathing."

"Kane!"

He grinned at her unrepentantly. "Is she gay?"

"No, she was married."

"That doesn't mean anything, Mother."

Sarah frowned into the meatloaf she was mixing. "How would I know? I just know she's had a terrible marriage, and with her parents dying so close together and... and everything. She's definitely not ready to think about marrying again. Besides," she added with what she hoped was just the right casual air, "she and Eric have been going out, occasionally. He's just the type of man she needs right now – easy going, good sense of humor, warm and funny."

Kane frowned for a second, trying to decide whether or not that was a backhanded insult. "Well, hallelujah. At least there's one woman alive you won't be pestering me to date." He snuck a kiss and went into the den to attack the mountains of paperwork a working ranch generated, trying not to think of how uncomfortable the picture of Eric and Rissa together was.

It was several weeks before he saw her again, at his brother's office. Eric Blackwell had inherited the same big, brawny body type as his brother, the same thick, dark black hair and tan skin that harkened back to their Native American ancestors. But there the similarities stopped. Eric's eyes were green and warm, and his face always had a welcoming, friendly smile. He was only three years younger than Kane, but somehow those years caused a tremendous difference in their personalities: they were almost exact opposites.

Where Eric was affable and outgoing, Kane was serious and brooding. Eric was fun and carefree, Kane was responsible and moody, to the point of appearing somber. The truth was that Kane, being the older, was just a more careful, watchful person. His intense personality and propensity for mowing down anyone or anything that stood in the way of accomplishing his goal was what had kept the family ranch above water when beef prices had fallen, due to lack of demand. As a result of his single-minded tendencies, they were now one of the richest families in the area, and darn near diversified enough to be recession proof. He had learned well at his father's knee.

Eric lacked the sharp, not quite civilized edge that Kane was reputed for. Nothing and no one particularly intimidated him – partly due to his size, and partly due to his inherent self-confidence. He knew who he was, what he could do, and what he wanted. And he always got what he wanted, one way or another.

Despite their differences, they were extremely close brothers from an extremely close family. Hell, Kane still, technically, lived with his mother, although he maintained an apartment of his own in Albuquerque. There was never any question that, after his father had died abruptly of a heart attack a decade ago, the brothers would take care of their mother. It was what their father would have expected, and neither one of them would have had it any other way, least of all Kane. He would lay down his life for anyone he loved, and he took care of his own.

When he entered his brother's law offices he stopped short – Eric's arms were wrapped around a petite, golden-haired woman, and he tried to bow out quietly, not wanting to interrupt.

"Kane."

Eric appeared in the doorway, his arm still around Marissa Davidson's shoulders. Kane watched, with his jaw tightly clenched, as his brother gently squeezed her arm in a comforting gesture. As usual, her mere presence put him on full alert. What the hell was it about her?

"You know Marissa, don't you?"

Marissa was obviously upset, but had blinked back the impending tears. The last thing she wanted to do was to show weakness in front of the big man. Eric, yes. Kane, never. She knew instinctively that he would exploit any perceived weakness to his fullest advantage. Where along the line they had become adversaries, she didn't know. But here they were. Knowing the best defense was a good offense, she walked out of Eric's protective hold and offered her hand to Kane. "It's been a long time since we've seen each other, Kane. How are you?"

He shook her hand firmly, holding her eyes with his. "Fine. You?"

Bare bones, ice cold politeness. But she would not let him intimidate her. "Fine." Instead, she turned back to Eric, and with not a whit of thought about the man standing behind her, hugged the stuffing out of him. "Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder."

Eric kissed the top of her head, which barely reached his shoulder. "Any time. That's why they make drip-dry shirts, honey."

Without another word, she skirted past Kane and out the door, practically sprinting in her effort to put some distance between herself and her friend's brooding, gorgeous, sexy, overpowering brother.

"What the hell was that about?" Kane asked with no preamble, following Eric into his office.

"She's having a really bad time right now. I offered her a sympathetic ear and a comforting pair of arms."

It was just what he didn't want to hear. Although he'd never dated her in his life, the idea of Rissa with his brother bothered him to no end. There was no way he wasn't going to stake his claim, one way or the other.

"Just see that that's all it is."

Eric stopped in the act of pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Excuse me?"

Kane intensely disliked having to repeat himself. Especially about something he felt as raw about as this. "Don't let it go any further than that," he fairly growled at his younger brother. "She's not your type."

Puzzled, because Kane had never warned him off any woman before, he reclaimed his seat behind the big desk. "Are you planning on asking her out?"

"No."

"Are you interested in her?"

"No." Not that he was willing to admit, anyway.

"Let me see if I understand this then: you don't want to date her, but for no earthly reason, you don't want me to, either."

Kane shifted uncomfortably in his chair – not due to the subject matter he was discussing with his brother, but rather because he had become achingly aroused and desperately needed to rearrange things.

"Yes."

Despite his affable nature, Eric was no pushover, either. "Dream on, Kane. She's coming out to the ranch with me Sunday night for dinner." The frown on the bigger man's face was truly frightening and only worsened when his brother added with an evil grin, "And mother *loves* her."

If they hadn't been related, Kane would have laid him flat in a heartbeat.

What the hell was it about that man that set all of her senses on edge? Rissa wondered as she drove home. It had always been like that. The Davidsons and the Blackwells had been friends forever, it seemed. Their parents had gone to school together and married and settled down in the same community. The fact that the Blackwells had eventually ended up as millionaires hadn't changed the lifelong friendships between their parents. Rissa had partly grown up on the ranch, doted on by the two sets of parents, as well as by Eric and Kane.

She had been attracted to him even then; in a childish, hero-worship way. He was her blatant favorite of the two brothers, even though Eric was closer to her age. Kane was kind and patient and took time with her, teaching her how to ride and care for horses, how to fish, and how to swim.

Until, for some reason, when she was getting close to leaving for college, Kane began to push her away – mentally and physically. His moodiness had never bothered her before, in fact, she was one of the few people he didn't mind having around him when he was out of sorts. She was intelligent, funny, and calmed him, even as a child. He never told her what it was, but something was different, and he just started not to be there when she came over, or was always too busy doing something else to spend time with her.

Eventually, she got over it and went away to college, moved away and married, then divorced and came home, only to end up nursing her parents until their deaths, mere days apart. She was just starting to become social again. Eric was a safe harbor – she knew he'd never hurt her. The events of the past ten years had changed her irreparably. She was much harder than she had been, more willing to stand up for herself. If there was one thing she'd gotten out of her disastrous marriage, it was that there was no one in this world you could truly count on other than yourself.

It had been an extremely painful lesson to learn.

The attraction was definitely still there, having matured into a sexual chemistry that nearly burned her up whenever he was around. Rissa's nipples tightened, breasts swelled, and she had to physically fight the urge to throw herself into his arms. She smiled wryly, turning into the driveway of the little Victorian house she'd inherited from her parents. Wouldn't that surprise the old stuffed-shirt pain in the arse?

Sunday afternoon came way too early for Kane's sanity. Marissa had come over and hung around for most of it, driving him crazy by ignoring him entirely. She hadn't spoken one word to him yet, and she'd been there for two hours. Her dog, on the other hand, loved him almost slavishly, for some reason. Tiny was a mastiff mix, and his name was a misnomer. He probably weighed in at a good hundred and twenty five pounds, easy. He was a big, lumbering cream puff, with more brawn than brains, but Kane realized that he must provide a decent amount of security for a woman living alone.

Dinner was loud and raucous as usual, and Rissa fit right in. She knew all the family in-jokes and wasn't shy about expressing her opinions about anything. The conversation was lively and the food was fantastic – some sort of chickeny-vegetable-garlicky-casserole thing that disappeared instantaneously.

Swallowing his last forkful, Eric sighed in ecstasy. "Now I know you have to marry me!" He winked at Marissa, and Kane hoped that the panic he felt at his brother's words didn't show on his face.

Sarah beamed and explained, "Rissa made the whole dinner. She said I deserved a night off."

"It's very good." The words sounded bland and disinterested even to his own ears. Skipping dessert, Kane excused himself and went out to get some work done.

While Eric and Sarah cleaned up, Rissa took Tiny out for his evening constitutional. He was not the brightest bulb in the pack, but he was conveniently neurotic – never wandering far from her side, always wanting to be close to Mommy. She hadn't even bothered to bring a leash. He wasn't likely to be hit by a car so far from the road, and the Blackwells owned all the land as far as the eye could see. His chances of being hurt were nil. As usual, he had to sprinkle his calling card all over the grass and the fences, letting every other doggy know who he was and what he was like, in scented, liquid letters.

What Rissa hadn't counted on was Tiny's unending curiosity and almost aggressive friendliness. When they encountered a solitary bull in a pasture, Tiny blithely jumped the fence and ran toward it, convinced he had met a new friend.

Marissa was so terrified that her dog was about to become bull food that she didn't hear the sound of rapid hoofbeats in the background. Instead, she sprang into action and was just about over the fence herself when she felt someone grab the waist of her jeans from behind and lift her into the air, dropping her unceremoniously over the front of a western style saddle on her tummy. The saddlehorn pressing into her stomach quickly became the least of her concerns when she found that the same someone – who could be no other than Kane Blackwell – was efficiently moving her jeans and panties down her legs, leaving her bare bottomed over the horse.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled, struggling to right herself.

The only answer she got was in the rapid and repeated descent of his broad, open palm on her vulnerable cheeks.

"Yeow! Stop that right now!"

Kane continued, as if she hadn't spoken, spanking her hard and furiously for several long minutes while he tried to keep his heart from coming out his mouth. She was going to jump that fence to rescue her stupid dog! He wanted to strangle her for putting herself in such danger, but this was going to have to suffice.

Rissa tried to wiggle away from the relentless rain of swats he was inflicting, but a hard, muscled arm across the small of her back held her virtually motionless. The best she could do until he decided to stop was kick her legs a little and scream bloody murder. Both of which she did, but to no avail. Kane didn't stop until her whole bottom was swollen a mottled shade of reddish purple. He hoped she wouldn't be able to sit comfortably for a week and said as much as he lifted her down to the ground. "Do you realize you could have been killed?"

She couldn't even process what he had just done. Marissa was crying so hard, she was having a hard time catching her breath. "Are – you – out – of – your – mind?" she had to breath between each word.

Kane swung back up into the saddle, staring down at her with piercing blue eyes. "I'm not the one who was just about to confront a bull."

Rissa bent over and leaned her forearms on her knees, still trying to catch her breath through the tears. Instinctively, she patted the pocket of her jeans for her ever-present inhaler, and, after shaking it well, she exhaled fully and breathed the medicine into her aching lungs.

Christ, he'd forgotten she had asthma! Immediately, he was by her side where she was still bent over. Kane put his hand on her back. "Are you okay?"

She exploded away from him, hiking up her jeans and panties in an inelegant two-step away from him. "Don't you touch me. Ever again."

Tiny, who had turned from the bull at the sound of hoofbeats and run back to greet Kane, trotted along dutifully behind her.

Well, he'd be damned if that wasn't a fine "thank you for saving my life."