

A Nice, Quiet Passing

As Carol watched her tall muscular blacksmith working, she thought again, hating herself again, about how nice it would be if her husband were dead.

She wasn't serious, of course. Not really. Only a passing fancy. When the time came, a nice, quiet passing into the other world was all she wanted for him since he wasn't a bad man, not mean, just a tad bit on the lazy side, like a big male lion with a shaggy mane. And, she had to admit, he had stuck with her, despite everything.

Eric Thomas, on the other hand, the blacksmith who visited their barn every thirty days to shoe the horses and was right now putting away his equipment and changing out of his sweaty wife beater into a fresh clean one, now there was a man who wasn't lazy or shaggy at all.

Wearing his Stetson and leather apron over well-worn jeans, he had bent over half the time he was working, innocently tempting her. She had watched him watching her and knew it would take little persuasion. That new wood-paneled office was just down the hall. The one she had built to help increase business, back when they could afford to increase business. It had a window air-conditioner that ran real quiet and a nice futon with a southwestern-style covering. Lord knows her husband would never catch them in there, seeing how he was away working most of the time. Even if he caught them, she doubted he would care. He just wasn't interested any more, it seemed.

But today it was too damn hot for that kind of thing, she thought as she lifted her ponytail and used her hand to fan her sweaty neck as she drew the checkbook from her back pocket. Also, she still had a tad bit of indigestion from that take-out pizza they had last night, for the second time this week.

Besides, she was an honorable woman. She'd been raised from the cradle to care for her man and what was his. She knew to keep her hands off some other woman's man. And, yes, she had seen the ring on the blacksmith's finger, now curled around the large vise-grip he used to pry the old nails out of the iron shoes.

She was an honorable woman.

And it had been good with her husband in the beginning. They had plenty of time to just be, riding the fences together, watching the foals play in the green mountain fields. He enjoyed taking her out to bars and concerts, showing her off and rewarding her in the bedroom. In those days, they'd go to the sales together just to look at the horses and dream about the future, but taking the trailer, just in case, they always said. Plenty of money from her mother's estate was still flowing in at that time, so when they saw that pretty little bay quarter horse or that Appaloosa with the big spots on his rump, they would bid, higher and higher, until they won. Then, they'd bring them home, and she would train them, him standing with his arms perched on the rail.

Watching her every move.

Now, the bay was lame, and the Appaloosa threw just about every lesson kid that got on him, foul-tempered thing. Only the advanced students could ride him, and students of any kind were few and far between. Things just weren't the same as in the days when she could ride all day and all night. She hardly ever straddled a horse, and her husband barely

stepped foot in the barn, taking a job at a lumber yard in the city to make ends meet. But she could still take care of her horses and afford to have Eric Thomas come out every month.

Eric turned to her now. All he wanted was the check, she knew. At fifty-three she was old enough to be his mother, but then again, she wasn't a mother, was she, since her husband had thought it best not to try. She'd kept herself up though, just because. Her graying hair was blonde, and she'd had her teeth bleached. Working in the barn day in and day out kept her trim.

She was strong, most days. But lately, like today, she was feeling off, getting older for sure and aching everywhere, her shoulder, her neck, her back.

He smiled at her and began untying his apron. "That'll be a hundred and sixty for your two. I got the checks from all your boarders."

A little flirting couldn't hurt. "What's it like having two first names?" she said and laughed.

"Ma'am?" he said.

Carol laughed again. "You know, Eric and Thomas."

The light came on. "Oh, yeah. Eric and Thomas. I never really thought about it much before."

"You're married, aren't you?"

"Not really."

"What do you mean? How can you 'not really' be married?"

"She left me a while back."

"But the ring," she said, pointing at the wide silver band.

His smile was forced. "Hadn't had the heart to take it off."

"Gosh, I'm sorry."

He shrugged and loaded the hoof stand, turning away from her. "It is what it is."

Carol, who had been leaning against a stall door, stood up straight and rubbed one grimy hand up and down her arm as he settled the hoof stand amidst the other farrier tools. He closed the tailgate and turned back to her. "That be all?"

She smiled. "Oh, yeah, but..." She felt a bit dizzy, looking at Eric. He was a very nice-looking young man--curly brown hair, brown eyes with long, thick eyelashes. But that wasn't it.

"Will that be all, Carol?"

She lifted her arm. To point to the house, she thought. "It's awful hot out here. Do you want something to drink?"

"Got some water bottles up front. You want one?" He didn't wait for an answer but went around to the cab and took out two water bottles. "Here," he said, nodding and handing the bottle to her. "You look like you could use one."

"I do?" She looked for her reflection in the truck's camper shell.

"I mean, you look fine. Just a little flushed."

"Flushed?" She put her hand to her face. It was hot, so hot. "I don't feel so good."

He reached out to her, and she dropped the water bottle, then fell into his arms.

"Carol," he said, holding her and brushing her face gently with one strong, calloused hand. "You got a cool place I can take you?"

"Office." It was hard to speak. "Down there."

He lifted her up. He carried her down the dusty aisle and somehow managed to open the door while holding her. He laid her down on the futon, put a little decorative pillow under her head before kneeling beside her. He picked up her hand, rubbing it gently. “Where’s your cell phone? I don’t have Jim’s number in mine, just yours. We got to call your husband.”

“Jim?” She looked into his brown eyes. He looked worried. The way her husband used to look when she first started having her spells. She reached up and stroked Eric’s face, feeling the stubbly growth and the sweat. “It’s okay, Jim.” She didn’t mind being here. She really didn’t. It was cool. It was quiet. She didn’t have to think about what could have been. “It’s okay,” she whispered, feeling her hand drop away from his face, as she fell into another world.