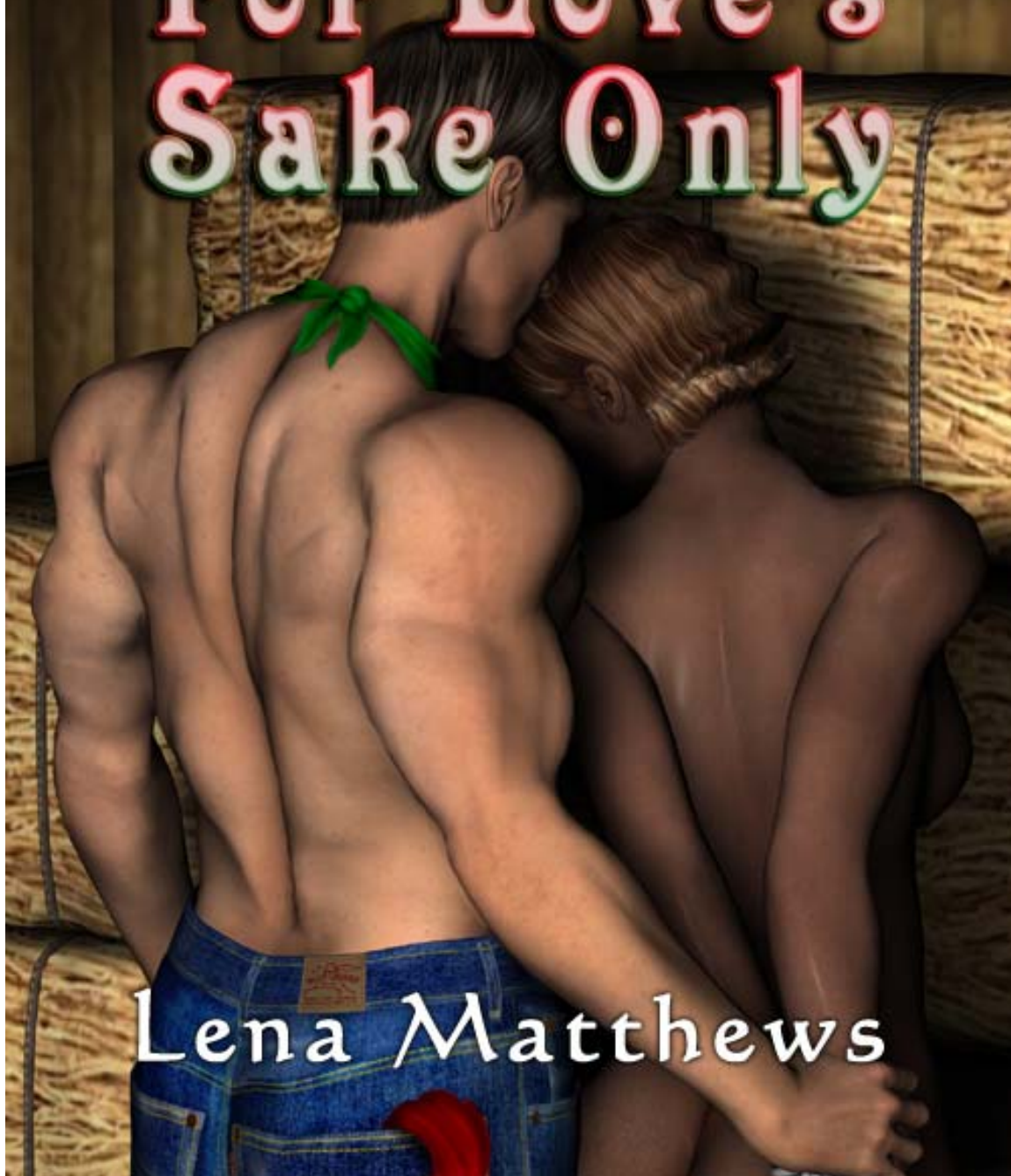




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Spurs & Mistletoe

# For Love's Sake Only



Lena Matthews

## Praise for the writing of Lena Matthews

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Ms. Matthews has created a group of wonderful characters that you will not want to say goodbye to. The deep sexual and emotional connection that Lola and Marcus share cannot help but end in love. This book should not be missed!

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# SPURS & MISTLETOE: FOR LOVE'S SAKE ONLY

Lena Matthews

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

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## Dedication

*For my Aunt Charlotte, who will die when she finds out I wrote this book with her in mind. Surprise, enjoy, don't kill me.*

## Chapter One

“Damn, these people are crazy,” muttered Charlotte, looking from the bucking rider to the crowd roaring their approval. “This is insane.”

A soft laugh escaped from TJ Maguire, her client from the rodeo company sponsoring the event. Charlotte could tell that the voluptuous redhead loved this sport just as much as the crazed fans hollering in the stands.

“You haven’t even seen the half of it,” TJ assured her with a smile.

And she wasn’t sure if she wanted to. People were shouting, cheering, and drinking more here than at any college football game she’d ever gone to. All over some fool holding on for dear life to a horse that didn’t want him on his back. If this was what this town did for fun, they could count her out.

“I can’t believe how crazy people are about this.” Crazy seemed like the right word, too. To Charlotte, it seemed a bit cruel and inhumane, yet the stands were filled with people who paid twenty-five dollars each to watch some man risk his neck for a stupid gold belt. She didn’t know who she felt more sorry for -- herself for having to be there, the rider getting jerked all over the place, or the animals being ridden for the crowd’s amusement. It was all a bit too much for Charlotte, a Los Angeles native.

Looking back at the field, Charlotte let out a loud sigh of relief as the rider was tossed down to the ground. The people filling the arena jumped to their feet, roaring their approval, as she sat still, praying for divine intervention. The ride had taken less than seven seconds, but to her it felt like a lifetime. And to think she thought hockey was a rough sport. "I'm going to grab something to drink," she shouted to TJ, who was on her feet with the crowd.

Sure that she wouldn't be missed, Charlotte scooted her way out of the stands and down the steep steps. She couldn't believe Nathan, her boss and friend, was considering giving up Los Angeles -- the Mecca of the business world, in her humble opinion -- for this place. As much as Charlotte adored him and enjoyed working for him, she really was beginning to question his judgment.

And he was giving it all up for a woman -- his entire life! For a woman who dressed up like a clown and willingly jumped in front of a bull. Something just wasn't right about that.

Walking around the stadium, Charlotte people-watched, observing the many different faces of people who loved rodeos. Her job required that she figure out how to draw in more people, but her brain didn't get the appeal to begin with. It wasn't like it catered to only the Caucasian population. There were Hispanics, Asians, and even a few African Americans wandering the grounds. More people were into rodeo than she would have ever imagined, and that straight baffled the hell out of her.

When she walked as far as she could and the noisy crowd finally dissipated, Charlotte found herself a bit lost. Wandering around, she headed down a corridor and followed the bright light looming up ahead, like the North Star in the dead of night. Hurrying her steps, she turned a corner and came to a dead stop in front of a wall of muscles, covered in plaid.

"Sorry, miss. I'm afraid you can't go back there," a firm voice stated, pulling her out of her silent reverie.



Startled, Charlotte glanced around, trying to get her bearings. *Go back there?* Hell, she didn't know where *there* was. Looking around the large beast of a man, Charlotte's eyes ran across wooden fences filled with animals calmly grazing in the sun.

"Ma'am." A giant of a man, dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt with the sleeves cut off, stood in front of the gate, staring down at her, with his massive arms crossed over his enormous chest. "You have to leave."

Well, that was beyond obvious. The last place she wanted to be was where they kept the smelly animals. Give her a dark alley filled with bums any day. "I'm sorry, I was only ..."

"Only owners and riders allowed back here," he interrupted, frowning down at her as if he was guarding the Holy Grail instead of livestock.

"That's fine, if you could just tell me ..."

"Look, lady ..."

Lady! For some reason, Charlotte seriously doubted he meant "lady" in a good way. "If you would stop interrupting me, this would go a lot faster."

The rhinestone-cowboy-in-training looked startled at her angry words. It was a look Charlotte was accustomed to seeing on a man's face, especially on the face of a man who thought he could walk over her because she was petite. "Where is the ..."

A loud whinnying drew her attention, as she darted around the hardheaded cowboy to get a better look. Something was wrong. Ignoring the menacing glare aimed at her, Charlotte side-stepped around the human barrier, but before she could get a step closer to the sound, beefy arms reached out and grabbed her, picking her up in the air.

"No reporters."

No, he didn't just grab her like that. "Put me down, you ass."

"Gladly," was the only warning she received before she was released as quickly as she'd been grabbed, and dropped onto the dusty ground. "No reporters."

Charlotte was able to keep herself from falling to the ground -- but just barely. Never in her life had she been grabbed like that, and he wasn't going to live much longer to brag about it. "Why? You got something to hide?"

"A body in a few minutes," he growled, stepping closer to her.

Eyes widening, Charlotte took his words for the threat he intended, but instead of running as he might have hoped, she stepped closer. Charlotte had never given into bullies, whether they were the corporate kind or the cowboy kind. Dicks came in every color, shape, and size, literally and figuratively, and she was more than able to handle them. "You are *so* dead, rump ranger."

"What is going on here?" bellowed a voice from behind her. Turning with every intention of blasting the new intruder, Charlotte was cut short by the size of the man. If she thought Tiny here was huge, then this man had to be enormous. He towered over her five-four frame by yards, and looked like the very definition of a cowboy.

He wore a t-shirt that seemed as if it was stretched beyond belief across his massive chest, and his long, lean legs were covered in denim. A cowboy hat adorned his head, worn low over his brow, with dark brown hair trickling down his tanned neck. He looked like the Marlboro man on steroids.

"We got a reporter trying to sneak back in the corrals," Dick Number One answered, staring at her.

"Reporters are allowed back here only after the tournament."

"Well, that's nice to know." Narrowing her eyes, Charlotte faced the larger man head on. Maybe he was able to understand English. "But since I'm not a reporter, it doesn't exactly pertain to me, now does it?"

"Sure you're not," her nemesis muttered behind her.

Charlotte twisted around quickly and shoved her finger in his face. "Listen carefully, cattle boy. I am not a reporter. NOT A REPORTER." The blank look on his face only further inflamed her. "Am I talking too fast for you?"

"You little ..."

"Ernest," the intruder said, stepping between them. "I think we can take her word for it."

*Ernest.* Charlotte snickered. No wonder he was so disgruntled. Turning back to her, the intruder looked down pointedly at her finger, which was still aimed menacingly at Ernest, and smiled. "I think you can put that away now. I wouldn't want you to hurt anyone with that thing."

Looking down at her index finger, Charlotte quickly yanked her hand back down to her side, slightly embarrassed. She couldn't believe she'd allowed the sun-damaged cowboy to ruffle her feathers. "If someone could just direct me toward the main office, I'll gladly leave." Charlotte resisted the childish urge to roll her eyes at Ernest, who was still staring at her as if he was waiting for her to rip out a notepad at anytime.

"I'll be glad to show you."

Finally, someone who wasn't suffering from sunstroke. "Thank you. I was beginning to think there was a cowboy-to-city-folk language breakdown here."

The brim of his hat didn't shield the laughter sparkling in his azure-colored eyes. "I took a correspondence course."

Charlotte couldn't resist the humor of the situation. The one good thing about arguing with Ernest was that it had taken her mind off of the horror show she had witnessed. "You mean, you get mail out there on the range?"

"Only as far as the crow flies."

The cowboy stuck his hand out to her and smiled. "Name's Tyson Wilcox, but you can call me Ty."

Charlotte returned his smile and took his work worn hand into hers. "Charlotte Sane."

"Shall we, Ms. Sane?" Gesturing out in front of him, with a sense of chivalry centuries too far gone, Ty shocked Charlotte, something that wasn't easily done.

"Thank you," she said softly, all thoughts of her surroundings now completely gone from her mind.

As they passed an irritated Ernest, Charlotte heard him say faintly, "Reporter."

"Cattle dung," she threw back over her shoulder, without losing her pace, feeling better than she had all day.

She had to be the cutest little thing Ty had seen in a really long time. It wasn't often he was caught off guard, but when he stumbled across the pint-size imp giving Ernest, a man who injured more men than a bucking bull, a hard time, Ty was impressed. He had actually seen Ernest make hardened men cry, but something about Charlotte's stance had said she wouldn't go down without a fight. And there was nothing Ty admired more than a filly with spirit.

At first he'd interceded on her behalf, thinking he was going to be saving her hide, but one look at her finger pointing threateningly at Ernest, and Ty quickly realized the wrangler was the person in trouble. Ty was willing to bet his daddy's land that Charlotte would have had Ernest roped and branded before the man knew what was coming.

"So what brings you to our little town?"

Charlotte glanced up at him, amused. "What makes you think I'm not a local?"

Okay, she must be kidding. Ty didn't know what Charlotte thought the locals looked liked in Santa Estrella, but they damn straight didn't look like her. No one who'd been raised around cattle would ever have attended a rodeo in black slacks and a cream-colored, button-up, long-sleeved shirt. And although the color suited her mocha-tinged skin, and she looked as tempting as sleeping in on Sundays, it was entirely the wrong thing to wear. It was almost

ninety-eight degrees in the shade, and she looked like she was about to attend a board meeting. A local she wasn't, but Ty wasn't going to hold it against her. "Let's call it a hunch," he simply said.

"Well, you're right, Cowboy Ty. I'm a long way from Kansas."

So, that's where they were growing sexy little she-devils these days. Ty made a mental note to visit Kansas more often. "Are you having a good time?"

Charlotte shot him a quick glance before looking away again. "Not really."

"Why not?"

"This isn't really ... my thing."

That was obvious. "So what *is* your thing?"

"Not torturing animals, that's for sure."

Ty stopped short, amazed at what he'd heard her say. Torture! Was she for real? "I don't know what you've been told, but I can promise you the horses aren't hurt, let alone tortured."

Sighing, Charlotte brushed her ebony bangs from her eyes and faced him. "Look, I know you more than likely make your living following the rodeo and wrestling bulls or whatnot, and I truly mean no disrespect to your chosen profession, but there's no way on God's green earth you're going to convince me it's not torture."

Well, hell. Only in a stadium full of single, beautiful women would Ty find the one PETA-pledging member. "It's nice to see you're open-minded about it."

"There's nothing to be open-minded about. You have your version ..."

"And what?" he questioned with a small smile. "You have the truth?"

"I wasn't going to say that."

Yeah, but something about the tilt of her chin assured him she was thinking it. "Is this your first rodeo?"

“And last, God willing.”

“Enjoyed it that much, did you?” he teased as they begin to head back up the corridor.

“Am I bowling you over with my excitement, or what?”

“Definitely *or what*.” The circuit wasn’t for everyone, but it wasn’t what Charlotte was making it out to be, either. “What brought you here, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Work.”

“You’re not with PETA or anything, are you?”

“No, but I have a mind to drop them a line.”

Ty reached out and touched Charlotte’s arm, stopping her in her tracks. “How much of the rodeo did you actually see?”

“I saw enough.”

Somehow Ty seriously doubted that. “Through your fingered-covered eyes? Or were you actually watching the show?”

There was a war going on behind her pretty brown eyes, as if she was battling with herself about how much she wanted to admit. “A little bit of both.”

“And did you get to see the animals afterwards?”

“The Lone Ranger didn’t let me anywhere near the animals.”

Her reference to Ernest brought a smile to his face. She had a quick wit and a spunky attitude. They were going to get along just fine.

“And besides, I’ll be back in Los Angeles in less than a week. With work and all, I won’t have time to visit the animals.”

“Darlin’, you’re breaking my heart.” The last thing Ty wanted to hear from this dark beauty was that she was leaving and wasn’t coming back.

“Why’s that?”

“Because your first memory of me isn’t going to be as pleasant as mine is of you.”

Eyeing him, Charlotte crossed her arms over her plush chest and eyed him amusedly. "Are all cowboys this smooth?"

Hooking his thumbs in the belt loops of his pants, Ty rocked back on his booted heels. "It's in the genes."

Looking down at the crotch of his jeans, which were getting tighter by the second, Charlotte looked back up at him and winked. "I'd say it's in the jeans."

Good Lord, the little devil was flirting. "Charlotte, I think I like you."

Laughing, she shook her head in mirth and started up the path again. Ty followed behind her shaking his head as well. She'd done it again. Just when he thought he had her in a little box, she surprised him. He could get used to that. That, and the way her plump little ass filled out her pants.

She was no bigger than a minute, but too cute for words. Her short dark hair was cute in a boy-like haircut, longer on top and tapered in the back, but Ty liked it. It was short and sassy, just like her. And her body -- good Lord, that body -- was what wet dreams were all about.

"Are you going to stare long?" she chided, raising a brow.

"Just long enough, I reckon."

"You're so silly," she laughed, tapping him on his arm.

"Thank you."

They talked as they walked through the stadium, seemingly of unimportant things, but Ty took every single piece of information she shared, and stored it in the back of his mind. He'd seen more in her in the five minutes since they met than he had in women he'd known for years, and it made him want to get to know her better.

He'd purposely taken the longer route to the main building so he could spend a few more minutes getting to know her. And although he had livestock to look after and riders to

check on, Ty found himself dragging out their stroll, just for a little more time with Charlotte.

“Not that I don’t appreciate this first class treatment,” she said with a smile, “but shouldn’t you be out there digging your spurs into a horse?”

“First of all, spurs, despite their bad rap, aren’t sharp, especially the ones used in rodeos. They’re mainly for show. The riders are trying to show the judges they have control of their feet and aren’t just sitting there like a lump of clay trying to hang on.”

“It takes skill not to fall off?”

“Apparently you’ve never had much power or speed between your legs.”

“Not the four-legged variety, that’s for sure,” Charlotte quipped back.

Ty couldn’t help but laugh. She was like a refreshing breath of air. And although all of her ideas about rodeos and ranchers in general were outdated, there was a kindness he recognized in her, which seemed out-of-date in most people today. She was misguided, but her heart was in the right place, and that alone was worth the time. “Seriously though, would you like to?”

“Ride a bucking horse? I don’t think so.”

“What about any horse? I have a small spread about forty miles away, and some of the sweetest horses God ever created.”

“So you don’t follow the circuit?”

“No, I don’t.” In fact, Ty hadn’t entered a rodeo in years. He was only there because two of his horses were, and if everything went right, by the end of the tournament they wouldn’t even be his horses anymore. But he wasn’t sure what Charlotte would find more repulsive -- the rider of the horse, or the owner allowing the horse to be ridden. Normally what others thought wouldn’t mean a hill of beans to him, but for some reason what Charlotte thought, did.

“Are you going to be here all weekend?”



"I'd planned on it, what about you?"

"I haven't made up my mind just yet."

Pausing at a little booth, Charlotte looked over the trinkets, eyeing the Indian jewelry being sold. Ty came up behind her and picked up a silver bracelet with tiny turquoise stones delicately entwined in it and held it up next to her arm. "This would look lovely on you."

Charlotte took it from him and slid it over her hand. Ty was right. The silver looked amazing against her bronzed skin, sending images of her wearing nothing but the bracelet racing through his head. "It is pretty."

"Let me get it for you." His words surprised them both. Yet he didn't want to take it back. Ty wanted her to have it, and more importantly he wanted to be the one who gave it to her.

"No, I couldn't," she said, setting it back down on the table. Charlotte turned to walk away, but was brought up short by Ty's hand on her wrist.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know you, for one."

"Do you want to?"

Eyes widening, Charlotte seemed at a loss for words. Ty was sure it was something that did not happen to her often.

"Do you always move this fast?"

"I don't believe in wasting time."

"Charlotte." A loud, booming voice called her name from behind them, causing Charlotte to turn quickly in the direction the sound came from.

"Shit, what time is it?" she muttered, trying to pull her arm from Ty's grasp. "I have to go."

Ty didn't budge. "Who's that?" he questioned with a frown. Ty didn't like the way the man was glaring at them, or calling down to her as if he had prior claims.

"My boss." Nodding her head to the frowning man in silent communication, Charlotte turned back to Ty with a disappointed smile. "I have to go. Thank you so much for the walk. You really took my minds off of things."

"I'm serious about the ride." Ty wasn't ready for her to go. Especially not ready to relinquish her to another man.

"Maybe another time." She gave him a parting smile, and went to leave, but still Ty didn't let go. Turning to him, she mockingly frowned, "Listen, cowboy, I'm going to need my arm back."

"When can I see you again?"

"Charlotte!"

"I'm coming!" she yelled back over her shoulder, yanking her arm free. "Infuriating pain in the ..."

"I want to see you again," Ty persisted.

Charlotte ran her free hand through her hair in frustration. "We're going to the little party tonight, will you be there?"

He hadn't planned on going, but there was no way he was going to miss seeing her again. "Yes."

"Okay, I'll see you then. I really have to go now."

With a parting smile, Charlotte hurried over to the other man leaving Ty standing in her wake, staring after with a smile. "Damn, she's something."

## Chapter Two

It was just like a scene out of *Urban Cowboy*. Cowboy hats adorned the majority of the heads in the bar, and people were wearing jeans tight enough to cut off the circulation in their nether regions. If Charlotte weren't afraid of drawing more attention to herself than she already did by being one of the only black faces in the crowd, she would have sat down and taken a few pictures. None of her girls back home would ever believe where she was.

Not that she was into the club scene back in LA, but still, here she was more like a fish out of water. And it didn't help that she was a tad overdressed for the evening. Where most of the women were in tight jeans and tiny shirts that barely covered their bosom, Charlotte was in a short black dress. It wasn't fancy, but it wasn't jeans. She'd wanted to look nice for the evening, and instead she just looked out of place.

But being different was something Charlotte was used to. Because of her profession, she was used to being the only African American, and sometimes the only woman, in the boardroom. Looks and comments were things she overlooked on a daily basis, so she knew she could overlook it for tonight. Especially if it meant she got to see her cowboy again.

And that was the way she'd begun to think of Ty, as her cowboy. Although they'd only talked for a little while, Charlotte found herself intrigued by the imposing man. There was

just something about the way he looked at her from beneath the brim of his sexy tan Stetson, that made her knees wobble and her pulse dance.

She'd thought about him all afternoon long. Normally, when it came to business, Charlotte was able to tune everything out and focus on the project at hand. It was how she had gotten so far in her career by the age of thirty-two, further than men who were more than double her age. But today, Ty had taken her mind off her game.

Even Nathan noticed her distraction, which was a bit odd, seeing how he was having attention issues of his own. For two lifelong workaholics, they were both having a hard time thinking about work. Must be something in the dusty air.

"If you say one word, I'll fire you on the spot."

Confused, Charlotte twisted around in her chair to see what had Nathan riled, and almost dropped dead on the spot. Her normally conservative boss was dressed like a country music singer.

"Oh, my God!" Eyes widening in shock, Charlotte couldn't have closed her mouth if her life depended on it.

"I'm not joking, Charlotte," he growled, pulling out a chair at the table and dropping into it.

"Who's laughing?" Charlotte wasn't amused. She was amazed. He looked damn good. Either her taste in men was changing, or there was something in the Southern California air that made men in cowboy boots and Stetsons suddenly look unbelievably great. Charlotte finally understood what the fuss was all about when it came to cowboys.

Nathan shot her a quick look, as if to judge her sincerity, and what he saw must have appeased him. "This doesn't get out."

His discomfort was amusing and endearing, all at the same time. "I'm not going to breathe a word, but damn, you could have given a girl warning. An ass that great deserves a heads-up."

"You're enjoying this a bit too much."

"As if you wouldn't if the situation were reversed," she teased, nudging him gently with her shoulder. "In the seven years I've known you I haven't been able to get you to change suit colors, and in one week, Calamity Jane has you wearing her brand."

"Her form of persuasion was a mite more tempting."

"It's like that, is it?" Damn, it was in the air. Charlotte was going to have to start taking shallow breaths if she was going to get out of Santa Estrella with her heart in one piece.

Nathan didn't answer her, which was answer enough. The intense look on his face spoke volumes, as did the way he perked up when Loren walked into his view.

He turned to Charlotte as he rose. "I'll be ..."

"It's all right, Nathan. I can take care of myself, you know."

With a nod, he was gone, and Charlotte was more amused than she'd been in eons. Nathan was a goner. Charlotte only wondered how long it would take him to admit it.

Sitting back in her chair, Charlotte sipped her wine as she watched the dance floor with a look on her face akin to amusement. The shuffling and buffing looked difficult, but in no way resembled the grinding she saw back home. Although some of the moves guaranteed that you knew all of your partner's body dimensions, it still wasn't the dancing she was used to. Neither was the music, if that was what they called this whining, blaring from the overhead speakers.

"So, is this more your thing?" said a smooth voice from behind her.

Charlotte smiled, but didn't turn around. She knew exactly who it was. His voice had been rolling around in her head all day long. "Not exactly, but close enough, I guess."

Ty chuckled and dropped a black hat on the table next to her drink, as he slid smoothly into the seat next to her. It was so slick, Charlotte wondered if it was a honed skill that he practiced over and over again on the local bar bunnies.

Charlotte had rehearsed how she was going to act, but when she turned to look at him, all thoughts of pretense flew out of the window. The man was fucking hot! There went her cowboy hat theory, because without it, Ty was still gorgeous.

Dark brown, curly hair brushed his temples and his nape, short enough not to appear too girlish, and long enough that she would have something to pull on in bed. His eyes were a brilliant shade of blue, with long lashes that almost seemed too feminine. On any other man they would have been, but on Ty, they just looked mouthwatering. His eyelashes were the only thing feminine on him, though. Ty had a strong jaw line, a nose that seemed as if it might have been broken once or twice, and the beginning hint of stubble on his cheeks, though Charlotte could tell he'd already shaved tonight.

Gathering her wits, Charlotte stumbled for something to say. Ty's effect on her was disconcerting, to say the least. Charlotte wasn't one to let men get the upper hand in her relationships. She liked to feel in control of everything, and the last thing she was feeling around Ty was in control.

"So," she said, mentally grasping at straws. "Is this your fancy hat? The one you wear for 'special occasions'?"

Ty's eyes crinkled at the corner. "Yes ma'am," he drawled in a fake southern accent. "I even have one for Sundays."

"Is this how you normally spend your Saturday nights?" she asked, taking a sip of her drink to steady her nerves.

"No, actually I don't come into town very often, unless I have business to attend to. The ranch keeps me pretty busy."

"So you made an extra trip to town just to see little ol' me," Charlotte teased.

"Yes." The way he said it was completely serious, and devoid of any humor, causing Charlotte to stare in surprise. She hadn't been expecting that.

"Oh."

"You seem surprised."

"Ty, I have to say there isn't much about you that doesn't surprise me." Charlotte was too blown away to try and play any games. She didn't know how to deal with him. He wasn't anything like she'd been expecting or used to.

His long, graceful fingers toyed with the rim of his hat, as he watched with an expression akin to amusement. "Don't you like surprises?"

"Normally, no." Charlotte hated not knowing what was coming next. She liked everything to be in nice, safe little boxes, especially her men.

"Then I guess you're going to have to get used to it."

Charlotte snorted instead of replying. Ty was too cocky for his own good. He reminded her of a male version of herself.

"Care to shine my belt buckle?" Ty asked, changing the subject.

Shine his what? "Excuse me?"

Ty smiled at her confusion and nodded his head toward the dance floor. "It's slang for dancing. See the way she's rubbing against him?"

It better have been slang. "See, where I come from, we call that grinding."

"A little culture shock, huh?"

Charlotte wouldn't necessarily call this culture, but whatever floated his boat. "Let's just say, when I hear the expression 'hoedown,' I think of something entirely different."

"And honky-tonk?" he asked, amusement gleaming from his eyes.

"You don't even want to know."

"You're probably right," he agreed with a smile. Holding his hand out, Ty tried again.  
"Well ..."

“I don’t think so,” Charlotte said, eyeing the people moving on the floor. Knowing her luck, she’d fall flat on her ass. She’d been blessed with rhythm from birth, but the moves they were making required a bit more than the ability to find the beat.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.” Ty stood up and moved to pull her chair back, but Charlotte shook her head no. Once again, he was going outside of her comfort zone.

When all else fails, pick a fight. “What, you want to take me out there so everyone can see what a fool I’m going to make of myself?”

His smile slowly slid off of his face, making Charlotte feel as low as an ant’s belly. She hits, she scores. “Sorry,” she muttered, wondering if her dress was loose enough for her to kick her own ass.

Ty leaned down until he was a hair’s breath away from her ear, his words tickling her senses as he spoke to her. “No. I want to take you out there so every man in here can see what a beautiful woman I have on my arm. I want to twirl you around, dip you, spin you, show you a different way to have a good time. But most importantly, I want a reason to be able to hold you in my arms, besides the fact that I can’t get you out of my head. Is that all right with you?”

Charlotte nodded her head like an idiot, too shocked to speak. Was he kidding? She wasn’t going to be able to stand, let alone dance, after his sexy little speech. She was weak-kneed, lightheaded, and completely aroused, and Ty hadn’t touched her with anything but his words.

Ty pulled back and tipped her chin up with his fingers so she was looking directly in his eyes. “Ms. Charlotte, you’re looking all kinds of good tonight. “ Dropping his fingers from her chin, Ty picked his hat up off of the table, and slipped it on his head. “May I have this dance?”

As if there was any doubt. “Yes.”

\* \* \* \* \*



It had taken a bit of work to get Charlotte on the dance floor, but Ty could tell she was having a good time now that she was out there. A few boot scuffs and a smashed toe later, she was dancing like a natural, following his lead as if they'd been partners for life. Ty was a big believer that chemistry on the dance floor was parallel to the chemistry a couple had in the bedroom, and by the way she was moving next to him, they would be combustible.

Ty hadn't been kidding when he said he wanted to feel her in his arms. From the moment he'd spotted her in the bar tonight, he knew that the attraction he'd felt earlier in the day wasn't all in his head. She was a sexy little package, especially when she was decked out like she was tonight.

The little black number she was wearing was stunning, particularly the way it molded to her curves the way his hands itched to. Ty missed a step or two because he'd been paying more attention to the way her ass filled out the back of her dress than he was to the flow of the song. But he couldn't help it. He was an ass man, and she had been blessed with a fine cut.

He wasn't the only man to notice the contours of her body. Ty was on the receiving end of several envious stares tonight, but he took it in stride. Charlotte was a beautiful, desirable woman, and any man alive would be a fool if they didn't notice.

Laughing as she missed a step and almost knocked into someone, Charlotte rolled herself into his arms and gave him a little bump with her bottom against his crotch. Ty's body, stimulated already from just being close to her, kicked into overdrive at the mere touch of her ass against him.

Charlotte looked up at him smiling, no doubt unaware of the havoc she was causing inside of him. Her pretty brown face was damp with perspiration and her eyes were lit with joy. It was a look he could get used to seeing on her face. She gestured for him to move in close, and leaned up to speak in his ear. "We better get off this floor before someone penalizes me for full body contact."

Ty nodded and led her off the floor. He'd had enough of the musical foreplay for one night. Ty was ready to move on to the next stage. The table she'd been sitting at was occupied now, so they squeezed up next to the bar.

"What would you like to drink?" he asked, nodding to the busy bartender, who was waiting to take their order.

"Water is fine." Grabbing a napkin off the bar, Charlotte dabbed at her forehead, as he paid for their drinks. Ty handed her the tall glass of ice water and watched in amusement as she drank it almost completely down in one gulp. His amusement quickly merged into arousal as he watched her take an ice cube out of the glass and run it over her throat and down her dusky cleavage. Ty would have given his left testicle at that moment to be the ice cube, or better yet, be the slip of water running down between her breasts. When the hell did his jeans get so tight?

"That was more fun than I'll ever admit," Charlotte said, dropping the lucky ice cube back into her glass. "But, like Cinderella, I should be heading home."

"*Home* home?" God wouldn't be that cruel!

"Oh, no, I'm here until Monday, then back home to LA."

The fates were kind to his undeserving soul. "Monday is a lifetime away. There are so many things that can happen between now and then."

Charlotte tilted her head and raised an eyebrow slowly. It was probably one of the sexiest things Ty had seen in a long time. "Sounds ... tempting."

God, he hoped so.

Easing back on the barstool, Charlotte crossed her leg over her knee. "Are you working the arena tomorrow?"

Ty paused with his beer in mid-motion, when she began to gently rock her foot in tune with the music. Her skirt rose up a bit, and he was playing peak-a-boo with her thigh.

"Earth to cowboy. Earth to cowboy," Charlotte teased, snapping her fingers to capture his attention.

Ty was too aroused to be embarrassed. "Listen, little lady," he drawled, watching her eyes light up with humor. "You can't expect me to pay attention to what you're saying up here, when you have my complete attention down there. I'm a man, sugar; I can't multitask."

"You're not even going to deny you've been ogling me and not listening to a word I've said?"

"Honey, I'm hardly listening now." Charlotte roared with laughter as Ty looked on with a smile. She might have thought he was joking, but he was completely serious. It was hard to pay attention to one thing, when his cock was focused on something else.

"You are bad."

"Darlin', you have no idea." But he'd liked for her to.

"You didn't answer my question earlier. Are you in the rodeo tomorrow?"

"Why? Would you come out and watch?"

"No, but I might be tempted to play nurse afterwards." Her words were like arrows shooting straight at his groin. Just when he thought she couldn't get any sexier, she'd up and say or do something else. It was getting to the point where it was hard to sit still.

"I'm not in the rodeo; my horses are."

Charlotte's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? I thought you were a rodeo rider guy."

"No, I haven't done it in years."

"It doesn't bother you to see your horses hurt?"

Good Lord, she was never going to give that up. "Charlotte, I swear to you on my father's soul, they aren't being injured."

"For all I know, you may not like your father."

Ty couldn't help himself, he had to laugh. Never had one person amused and aroused him so much. "I happen to have loved my father very much, and as far as the horses go, you don't have to take my word for it. Come check them out before and after the show tomorrow. I'll give you a grand tour."

"Is this kinda like 'Come up and see my etchings'?"

"Whatever gets you there."

"I don't know. Ernest, the cowboy from hell, might not let me come back."

"Let me worry about Ernest."

"We'll see. I do have to do some work while I'm here."

"Not 'we'll see.' Say yes."

She raised her brow again, in the way he was beginning to love. "Are you always this demanding?"

"Yes." And as far as Ty was concerned, it was best that Charlotte find out now. She was a strong woman, he could tell right away. He could also tell that she was used to men following her lead, and if she thought she was going to play games with him, she seriously had another think coming.

"I'll try my best, but I really should be going."

Ty nodded, allowing Charlotte to think she'd won the battle. There was no doubt in his mind that she would be at the corral tomorrow; she was just trying to get him to squirm. Charlotte obviously didn't know him well. "I'll walk you to your car."

"It's okay, I didn't drive here. I just walked over. I'm staying at the Marriott a few doors down."

Even better. "Not a problem. I don't mind a little stroll."

They hardly talked as they exited the bar, just exchanging small glances and small talk as they got closer to her hotel. Ty could feel the air thicken between them, both of them knowing a choice was going to have to be made about what to do once they arrived at her

room. Ty knew what he wanted, and he could tell she wanted the same thing too, he just didn't know if she would admit it.

"I had a really nice time," she said as she walked backwards to her door. Ty didn't say anything, but continued to maintain eye contact with her. He wasn't ready for the evening to end. He wasn't ready to say good-bye.

Tossing him a quick smile, Charlotte had turned to slide the card in the slot when Ty grabbed her free hand and turned her around to face him. She was just going to slip in and disappear. "I can't let you slip away without knowing how you taste."

Ty normally wasn't one for public displays of affection, but he felt an overwhelming need to feel her body against his own, and their location was the least of his worries. Dropping her purse onto the ground, Charlotte moved into his embrace as if she was coming home. All pretense of modesty was gone as they met each other halfway, both eager to taste one another.

Their mouths melted into one, demanding and seeking, urging each other on, as they rose together. Ty easily picked Charlotte up and leaned her back against the wall, all without breaking free of her tempting mouth.

She was such a tiny thing, no bigger than a minute, yet Ty didn't doubt they would fit well together. When it came down to it, everyone was the right size when they were lying down.

"Why don't you invite me in?" he whispered against her lips, not wanting to move away from her intoxicating mouth for a single moment.

"That's not a good idea," she moaned, as she slid her hands down his back, pulling him closer to her.

"Oh, but I disagree." Moving his hand from around her back, Ty slid it down her small waist and down to the lush bottom that had been tempting him all night.

Charlotte's grip tightened for a moment before she released him, and turned her mouth away from his, giving him another tempting place to graze. "This is crazy. We just met today."

"I'll respect you in the morning," he promised, nudging her neck with his lips. Ty felt like he'd been waiting a lifetime just to get her in his arms, and now that she was there, he didn't want to let her go. It felt so right.

"But I might not respect you," she said with a soft laugh, gently pushing him back.

Ty groaned, as he sensed her conviction. He was as hard as steel, and the last thing he was worried about was her respecting him. "Just for the record, I'm okay with you thinking I'm cheap."

Charlotte slid her hand between them and used it as a restraint to hold him back. "Tomorrow isn't that far away."

"Right now it feels like eons."

Chuckling, Charlotte stood up on her tiptoes and brushed her mouth against his again. Before he could deepen the kiss, Charlotte pulled back. "You're hell on my senses, cowboy. "

"Trust me, darlin', it's mutual."

"Tomorrow," she said, sliding her hand down his stomach slowly, before allowing it to drop back down to her side. "Tomorrow."

Charlotte turned quickly and unlocked her door, slipping in before Ty could stop her. Hard as hell and twice as horny, Ty gave a deep groan before dropping back against her door in frustration. She wanted him and Lord knew he wanted her, too. Who gave a rat's ass about the rules?

Looking down at his watch, he gave a little chuckle before turning and knocking on her door. There was a shuffle of noise, before Charlotte opened the door again and looked up at him unsurprised.

"Yes, cowboy?" she asked, her voice as ruffled as he felt.

Ty put his hand on the door and pushed it open. "It is tomorrow."

### Chapter Three

If it were any other night, in any other city, with any other man, Charlotte would have been able to resist temptation. But it was hard as hell, tonight, with Ty. Never before had she even contemplated having a one-night stand, let alone sleeping with a man she'd just met, but once again, it was something in the air, and just something about *this* cowboy that was making her break all of her rules.

It was almost as if he had read her mind and knocked on the door just as she was kicking herself for not having the courage to go the extra step. The same courage that was escaping her again, now that he was standing right in front of her.

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind." *Liar!* her conscience screamed at her, as she held firmly to the door. It was the only thing of substance holding her up.

Ty just smiled and stepped in her room, nudging her back with a hand on her waist. "It's what I've had in mind, all night."

"Oh ..." Words escaped her, as her pulse sped up. Cowboys should come with a warning label.

"If you don't want this, say so now."



"Lock the door," she whispered, tired of fighting herself. It was a losing battle, especially when she didn't even want to win.

Satisfaction appeared in his blue eyes as he released her and locked the door behind him. Nervously, Charlotte turned away from him and walked to the edge of her bed. It had been a long time since she'd made love, and this would be the first time she had ever made love with a man of another race. What was he expecting? What was she expecting? What if all of the stereotypes were true?

All of her questions flew out of her head as she felt Ty step up behind her and slide his arms around her waist, pulling Charlotte back against his hard body.

The hard, cylindrical shape of his penis against her back put aside all doubts about whether or not the size thing was a myth. Ty felt more than capable of handling all of her wants. "I don't know what to think about this."

Ty leaned forward, and nuzzled the back of her neck, sending shivers down her entire body. "You think too much," he whispered softly, tightening his grip on her.

"I've never done this before."

"I don't care about yesterday or tomorrow. All I care about is tonight."

"But ..." Ty spun her around and took her mouth under his. Charlotte's protest dissipated as she was swallowed whole by his passion. Their tongues entwined, stroking each other to a feverish pitch. They kissed as if they were desperate for each other, and for Charlotte, at least, it was true.

It was a difficult position to maintain, with her being as short as she was, but it allowed her to feel every inch of his body against hers. Every hard, long, full inch of his body.

Breaking away from the kiss, Ty grabbed onto her waist and hoisted her up onto the bed until she was standing up. Charlotte laughed as she held onto his shoulders, trying to gain her balance.

“Lift up your leg,” Ty ordered, pulling the shoe off her foot when she obeyed. He did the same to her other shoe and slowly lowered her leg back to the bed. Cupping his hands around her calves, Ty watched her face as he ran his hands slowly up her thighs, to the hem of her dress.

Charlotte felt faint as Ty lifted the dress and pulled it over her head. Dropping down to her trembling knees, she was finally, thanks to the height of the bed, face-to-face with the towering man, and enjoyed the view of his eyes darkening with passion as he took in her provocative stance on the bed.

“You’re not small everywhere, I see.”

Narrowing her eyes, Charlotte tugged on his t-shirt and pulled him in closer to her. “You better be talking about my breasts, buster.”

“Oh, I am, baby, those and this ...” Ty pulled her closer and smacked her on her full ass. “... sweet, sweet behind. From the first moment I saw you, I wanted to sink my teeth into you.”

Smirking, Charlotte shook her head. “Sorry, cowboy, but no biting allowed.”

Ty took both of Charlotte’s hands and pulled them back behind her, capturing them in one of his. “I think there might be a breakdown in communication, princess, but you’re not in control in here. I am.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened as her heart skipped several beats. Licking her lips, she baited. “Who said?”

“I did.” Moving his hands softly over her ass, Ty raised it again and delivered another stinging tap. “You have a problem with that?”

Was he joking? Charlotte couldn’t think straight. Talk like that wasn’t supposed to be sexy. She was a liberated, no-nonsense woman, who ... who was melting at his take-charge attitude. It was a good thing she was never going to see him again after tonight, because if anyone ever heard about how wet he got her with just a smack of his hand, she’d die. “No.”

“Good.” Stepping away from the bed, Ty pulled his t-shirt over his head. “Reach around you and release those beauties. Do it slowly. I want to enjoy the show.”

She was going to die. Just flat out die. Ty was expecting her to follow orders when all she wanted to do was to follow his hands down his flat, rippling stomach to the zipper that was holding back the one thing she couldn't wait to see. But he paused, with an amused smile on his face. “I'm waiting Charlotte. Don't make me tell you twice.”

Her muscles quivered as she hurried to obey. *When did the situation reverse and he become the one in control?* Charlotte never let anyone get the upper hand with her, it wasn't how she worked. Yet with Ty, all she wanted to do was to cater to his every want and desire. Charlotte didn't want to waste time fighting, when she was just delaying what they both wanted. Unhooking her bra, she tossed it casually to the side, and sat back down on her heels, waiting for him to make a move.

It was Ty's turn to stumble. His eyes narrowed on her breasts, as her mahogany nipples tightened with arousal from watching him stroke himself through his jeans. Charlotte had never felt so decadent.

“Sit back,” he ordered as he dropped to his knees in front of her. Charlotte's rear end barely touched the bed before Ty's hand wrapped around her hips and pulled her until her legs were dangling off the edge of the mattress. Grabbing the band of her lace black panties, Ty slowly pulled them off, ordering her to lift her hips as he pulled them down her body.

Her legs were spread lewdly before him, her wet sex aching for him. Pushing her thighs further apart, Ty brought her moist center up to his waiting mouth, and finally put his devilish lips to some good use.

Charlotte gasped when Ty's tongue found her aching center. It had been so long since she'd felt the touch of a man, and damn, did it feel good! His lithe tongue tasted and teased her latten-tinged labia, before zeroing in on her aroused clit, as Charlotte writhed on the bed

in ecstasy. It seemed as if his mouth discovered every secret of her sensitive folds, bringing her body quickly to orgasm from his tongue alone.

“You’re so responsive, baby. I could devour you all night.” Ty blew gently on her sensitive nub, bringing forth new sensations to her already aroused body.

“Stop,” she practically mewed, pushing on the top of his head to ease him away from her tender clit.

“I’ve only just begun.” Ty pushed up from between her legs, standing up in front of her, naked and proud.

Charlotte didn’t know when he had taken off the rest of his clothes, and she didn’t care. All she wanted was his cock in her. And she wanted it now. Sitting up, she reached between his legs and grasped his hard member in her greedy hands. Ty was just as large in the penis department as he was everywhere else, and she couldn’t wait to be filled by him.

Slipping his cock between her hungry lips, Charlotte slid his smooth length as far into her mouth as she could. What she couldn’t fit, she pumped gently with her hands, enjoying the feel of him finally in her body. But Ty had other plans. He wrapped his hands in her dark hair and used it as a handle to pump her up and down his thick cock.

There was something very powerful and vulnerable about Ty controlling the rhythm and speed. Her safety was in his hands, as his most prized possession was in hers. With the blowjob under his control, Charlotte was able to concentrate on the taste and feel of her new lover and virtually leave the driving to him.

A hoarse chuckle filled the air, as he released his hold on her hair and slowly pulled his cock out of her mouth. “Damn, darlin’.”

Licking her parched lips, Charlotte stifled the urge to pull him back in and finish him off. His taste was addictive, much like the man himself. “Why did you stop?”

Ty leaned down and picked her up, pushing her further back on the bed. "Because as wonderful as your hot mouth felt, I'm willing to bet your sweet pussy will feel ten times better."

Good Lord, Charlotte thought. She had officially died and gone to heaven.

She was so damn sexy it hurt. A body made for loving, and a mouth made for sin, Charlotte was like birthdays and Christmas all rolled into one. The thought that, in just a few short seconds, he was going to be able to slide into her tight little body, was making his balls hurt.

As if the feel of her mouth sucking him in hadn't been hot enough, Ty had to settle his erratically beating heart down when he watched his pale cock disappear into the dark beauty's mouth. It was an erotic scene he'd never imagined before, and it made him harder than he would have ever thought. Finally, Ty understood why God had made people of different races. The beauty of the mingling colors was enough to take his breath away.

Reaching onto the floor, he pulled his wallet out and grabbed the three condoms he'd stashed in there earlier in the evening. With a flick of his hand, Ty tossed two onto the bed as he ripped open the remaining one.

Perched up on a bent arm, Charlotte glanced down at the condoms and then back up at him with a slight smirk on her pretty face. "Only three, cowboy?"

"Don't worry, darlin', us cowboys always have a back up plan." Like coming in her mouth, her ass, her hand. Ty wasn't going to let the lack of condoms spoil the many opportunities her willing body had to offer.

Ty slid the condom on, all the while staring at Charlotte's body displayed wantonly in front of him. He could sense her desires and taste the lingering essence of her pussy in his mouth.

Reaching back to the floor, Ty picked up his pants and pulled his belt free from the loops. Charlotte's big brown eyes widened as she pushed up to a sitting position. "What do you think you're doing with that, cowboy?"

Her voice quivered as she spoke, but Ty noted what else happened. Her nipples hardened, and she licked her lips as if in anticipation. It was those telltale signs that convinced him to revisit the belt idea later. His cock jerked in agreement.

"I want you to hold onto it, above your head."

"Why?"

Climbing into bed next to her, Ty laid the belt above her head. Taking her hands firmly into his, he raised them as well, watching in satisfaction as she grasped the belt like he'd instructed.

"Because the headrest on the bed sucks, and I want you to let yourself go for me. To let me make you come over and over again, knowing that I, and only I, am in control of your passion." Ty slid between her parted legs, feeling the hot, moist heat from her center brush against his abs. Charlotte was just as turned on as he was. Her pebble-hard nipples and the moisture gathering between her satin legs spoke volumes to him. "I want to make you come."

"Again," she whispered hoarsely.

"Again and again and again." Reaching between them, Ty grasped his aching cock, and centered it against her wet entrance.

Ty slowly pushed inside of Charlotte's waiting body, biting down on the side of his mouth so as not to cry out. He was larger, larger than most, and Ty knew if he wasn't careful he could hurt her. But it was killing him to restrain himself and not drive deep into her waiting body like he wanted. Her pussy was that good.

Hot, luscious, and tight, the warmth from her body damn near seared the condom to his skin. For the first time in a long time, Ty wanted to feel a woman's body without the added benefit of latex. He wanted to feel her warmth firsthand as he powered into her. The

only thing holding him back was the knowledge that this time wouldn't be the last time he was with her. They had plenty of time for bareback when she knew him better -- and she *would* know him better.

"You're burning me alive, darlin'," he growled, pulling back before powering in again.

Charlotte arched her hips up to his for more. Her arms held tautly above her head by sheer willpower alone, were trembling with her effort. Ty could tell she wanted to move them, but like a good girl she didn't. "Ohhh ..." Charlotte closed her eyes as she arched up to him, biting down on her lip to stifle her moans.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck ..." she muttered over and over again, singing her own little song of ecstasy, and Ty couldn't agree more. He wanted to fuck, fuck, fuck her all night long. "Harder please ... harder."

A woman after his own heart. "Anything you say, darlin'."

Steadying himself on his knees, Ty pistoned in and out of Charlotte. Her pussy grasped at the length of his cock, gripping it tightly as he undulated deep inside her hot tunnel. Ty wanted more. He couldn't get deep enough. Moving his hands, he placed them by her head so he could move deeper. Turning her head, Charlotte bit into his forearm, crying out her pleasure around him. Her sharp teeth dragged a fierce growl from Ty as the added slice of pain slid like a lover's caress down his soul.

"That's it, baby, give me everything. Give it all to me."

Charlotte ripped her mouth away from his arm and cried out with passion. Jerking her hands from above her head, she moved them, belt and all, over Ty's shoulders, gripping his pumping ass with the leather of the belt, pulling him tighter into her. "Don't stop. Don't stop," she begged as she met him thrust for thrust.

The cold, abrasive leather bit into his taut buttocks as Charlotte used the belt as leverage to force him deeper into her body, but Ty didn't mind. In fact, he loved that he had brought her to that feverish pitch.

“Come on, darlin’,” Ty growled, picking up speed, “take more.”

Charlotte whimpered his name as she gyrated on the bed. Her body shivered as she took more and more of his hard cock. “Ty ... Ty, please ...”

“Right there, honey, right there,” he urged as he felt his own orgasm creeping up his spine. She felt so fucking good. Ty didn’t think he could ever get enough of her tight body.

“Oh, God, oh, God ...” Charlotte cried out as she came, pulling him deeper into her body.

The walls of her vagina pulsed with her release as she milked his cock plunging into her depths. Ty bit back a masculine groan as he pumped in rapid succession, coming into her grasping body. His entire body ached with his release, and his tense muscles quivered as he pulled out of Charlotte slowly.

Spent, Charlotte released her grasp on the belt and dropped her arms down to the sides of her lethargic body. Her body glistened with sweat as she lay dazed on top of the quilt. A lazy chuckle escaped her as she rolled her head over to look at him. “Damn.”

Laughing, Ty couldn’t have said it better. They had fucked like it was an Olympic sport, as if they were going for the gold. His body was a trembling mass of nerves, everything still tingling from their release, and yet, despite the massive release they had both just experienced, his hunger for her was not sated.

Ty eased out of the bed and disappeared into the bathroom, coming back tidied up and with a cool washcloth for Charlotte. Sitting down on the bed, he slid the cloth between her legs, startling her into opening her eyes. “If I were a cat, I would purrrrr ...” she teased.

“I could have sworn I heard a purr somewhere in there.”

“Are you sure that didn’t come from you, cowboy?”

“Cowboys don’t purr.” He growled playfully.

Her warm brown eyes were alight with mischief as she rolled onto her side, running her delicate hand down the length of the belt. “You get points for creativity, that’s for sure.”



“And you get points for taking orders.”

A slow smile spread across her face. Running her hand up his thigh, she brushed her fingers against his cock. “I follow orders well.”

His sleeping cock aroused from its vegetative state. He'd give her an order, all right. “Let's put it to a test, shall we?” Dropping the towel onto the ground, Ty crawled over, cradling her body under his.

He wasn't in the mood for foreplay; he just wanted her hard, fast, and as often as she could take. Sliding his hand down her thigh, Ty raised her leg over his hip as he settled down between her supple thighs once more.

“Ty,” she said, bracing his chest with her hands.

“Yes?”

“This time put your hat on.”

## Chapter Four

Charlotte was a coward. It wasn't something she was proud of, but it was the truth. Too embarrassed to face Ty this morning, she had snuck out of her own hotel room. Her own room, for Pete's sake, and here she was now, roaming the rodeo grounds feeling like a fool. Fool was the other stand-out word that kept rolling around in her mind, because only a fool would willingly leave a man as handsome and virile as Ty asleep and alone in the room.

Last night had been one of the best nights of her life, but this morning, Charlotte had rolled over and seen Ty still in bed, looking as beautiful asleep as he did awake, and she instantly became petrified. For her first and last one-night stand, she had definitely picked a winner, but knowing that Ty would know how easily she had given in to his charms made Charlotte feel horrible.

The old adage was true; no man would buy the cow if he got the milk for free. And Charlotte had been extremely free last night. Free with her wants, free with her desires, and completely free with her body. She had let Ty, a man she'd only known for a day, do things with her that she had never allowed her past lovers to do. There was just something about him that made her give in to him. Something lethal, and she had to run from him, and herself, before she did something stupid, like lose her heart to him.

Pushing the trailer door closed, Charlotte leaned back against the cool wood and banged her head softly repeatedly into the door. She had only come down for the weekend. Two days to do grunt work and then straight back home. And in one night she had put aside all of her morals and beliefs and given in to a handsome man in a Stetson.

"So stupid!" She cursed herself for the hundredth time, but this time, like the last, she wasn't sure if she was cursing herself for leaving his bed, or allowing him into her bed in the first place. The ringing phone cut off her self-loathing. "Sane here."

"That's always good to hear," chuckled her best friend, Tamara. "So how are things on the Ponderosa?"

Charlotte closed her eyes for a second and smiled. Tamara's friend-radar must have gone off. They had always been able to tell when one needed the other. "A bit more exciting than I ever thought possible."

"Really? Do tell?"

"I am such an idiot." There were no two ways about it. Walking across the room, Charlotte set her briefcase on the table before sitting down in a chair.

Tamara's warm laughter filled the line. "I so love when your rants begin this way."

"Then you're going to love this." Taking a deep sigh, Charlotte blurted out what had happened last night, giving as much detail as possible considering her location. By the time she had finished bringing Tamara up-to-date, Charlotte was exhausted, and feeling ten times the fool. "I can't believe I ran out on him."

"I can't believe you're able to walk."

"No shit." She laughed, shaking her head in denial. "I'm such an idiot! Why did I leave him?"

"Because you're an idiot. I thought we already went over that," Tamara concurred, without missing a beat.

"Tamara, you're not supposed to agree with me."

“Please, I’m your friend, if I can’t tell you when you’re being an idiot, who will?”

“Do you have to say it with so much glee?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

Charlotte could hear the amusement and love in Tamara’s voice, and it went a long way to sooth her rumbling nerves. Standing up, she walked across the room to the large windows. “Do you think I’m a skeez?”

“Hell, no. For once in your perfect little life you went out and had a great time, with what sounds like a great man. That doesn’t make you a whore, Char, that makes you human.”

Leaning against the window, Charlotte looked out at the busy rodeo. Who would have ever thought she would have had to travel three hundred miles to find her humanity? “Being human sucks.”

“Who are you telling? Last night you spent the night playing Cowboys and Indians, and I spent it poring over job applications. How is that fair? I was so depressed, I ended up eating a box -- yes, you heard me, a box -- of brownies. Being unemployed is hell on my diet.”

“Tamara ...” Charlotte groaned.

“Oh, don’t ‘Tamara’ me. I ate a box of brownies. You slept with a cowboy. I’m thinking we’re about even.”

“Yeah, but I bet I enjoyed Ty a hell of a lot more than you enjoyed your brownies.”  
Charlotte couldn’t help but tease.

“Well, that’s good to know,” said a hard voice from behind her. Charlotte whirled around from the window and almost dropped the phone as Ty slammed the door shut behind him. “Because for a moment there, I was beginning to wonder. Hang up the phone.”

Shaken by the fierce look in Ty’s eyes, Charlotte quickly pulled the phone back up to her ear. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Later?” Tamara jumped on the one word like it was the last lifeboat off the Titanic.  
“Why later?”

"Because I have company."

"The kind of company that spends the night?"

"Yes."

"Ooh ... I want details."

Ty stalked toward her, looking angry as hell. "Hang up the phone *now*."

"Later," Charlotte promised, hanging up without saying goodbye. "Ty, I'm surprised to see you."

"I bet you are." His tone was as fierce as his expression, but Charlotte refused to cower.

"Is there a problem?"

"You could say that." Ty pressed a hand against the window and leaned in close to her. "I'm really disappointed in you, Charlotte."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Charlotte returned Ty's glare with one of her own. "Sorry, cowboy, I gave it my best shot. If last night didn't do it for you, I don't know what will."

"Last night was wonderful, as you well know. It's your morning-after attitude that needs some adjusting."

"Lucky for you, you won't have to worry about it any longer." Ducking under his arm, Charlotte walked a few steps away. She needed to clear her head, and fast.

"Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte," Ty tsked, walking up behind her. Brushing gently past her, he took off his hat and dropped it down on the table, casually sitting down next to it. "I never took you for a coward."

It was one thing for Charlotte to call herself a coward, but quite another thing for Ty to do it -- no matter how right he was. Walking around him, Charlotte grabbed her briefcase off the table. "This meeting is over."

Reaching out, Ty grabbed her arm and halted her exit, ruining her perfect parting line in the process. Bastard.

“Far from it, darlin’.”

“Listen, cowboy ...”

“No, you listen. I’ve met some stubborn women in my time, but you, my dear, take the cake. Leaving like you did, Charlotte, was cowardly and low.”

“You’re just mad because I left before you had the opportunity to.” That didn’t even make sense to her, but it was better than saying, *I’m scared*.

Ty released her arm and stood back up. “Is that what you really think?”

“Look, I’m sorry if I broke some morning-after courtesy. I figured it would be easier all the way around if I just left when I did.”

“Easier for whom?”

Finally, the million-dollar question. “For both of us. I just don’t want to make this into a big deal. We had a good time last night.”

A soft smile passed across his face, causing Charlotte’s heart to kick it up a notch. “Just good?”

“Okay,” she admitted, with a smile of her own. Who was she kidding anyway? “A very good time, but that’s all it was.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Was he crazy? Hell, was she? Because Charlotte was more than tempted. “Ty, we’re from two completely different worlds.”

Chuckling, Ty brushed his callused hand against her cheek. “Last time I checked, Charlotte, Los Angeles was still on Earth.”

"Are you being obtuse on purpose?" Why couldn't he have been like every other man on God's green earth, and be happy that she'd snuck out? Without even thinking, Charlotte leaned her head into his hand. It felt so right. "You know what I'm saying."

"I hear everything you're saying. I just don't buy it."

"You don't have to. All that matters is that I do." She was going to remain firm on this. He was so capable of breaking her heart. After one night she was already in pieces because of this man.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, *why*?"

"I mean, why are you trying so hard to push me away?"

There was something very, very dangerous about this man. If he wanted, Ty could have her eating out of his hand, and Charlotte was afraid he knew it. "It was a one-night stand."

"It doesn't have to be. Last night was one of the best nights of my life. Sex aside, I really like you, Charlotte."

"You don't even know me."

"I know enough."

Rolling her eyes, she stepped away from his caress. "Like what?"

"Like I want more."

Ty watched the doubt flitter across Charlotte's face, partially frustrated and partially amused. She was as stubborn as she was beautiful, and that was really saying a lot. And she was hell-bent on driving him insane.

"This will never work," she repeated, as if he didn't understand her the other times she said it. He understood her, all right, and part of him, be it ever so small, even agreed. But just

being in the same room with her again was causing his gut to clench. Charlotte had a pull over him, and she was worth it.

“How do you know?”

“Because ...”

“Not good enough,” Ty interrupted. He had never had to beg a woman in his life, and he wasn’t going to start now, but he’d be damned if he let her walk out of his life without even giving them a chance.

“What do you want from me?” Charlotte’s fear was as apparent as her need.

Everything, but Ty knew if he said that, she would hightail it out of the room so fast his head would spin. “Come with me. Now.”

“Where?”

“To my home. Give me tonight.”

“I’m leaving for home tomorrow.”

“That’s tomorrow. I want tonight.”

Charlotte eyed him warily, as if she still didn’t quite trust him. She was like a skittish mare, in need of a firm yet tender touch, and Ty was just the man to provide both.

“This is crazy.”

“I’m willing to concede that,” he admitted with grin. Despite how persistent he was being, Ty knew that this was fast. Hell, he was even amazed at the speed in which he was going, but he couldn’t help himself. Call it strange, call it fate, call it insanity, Charlotte was the one for him.

“I have to leave in the morning.” Charlotte repeated, stressing the word *morning*.

Holding out his hand to her, Ty asked, “Is that a yes?”

Sighing, Charlotte placed her hand in his. “Yes.”

\* \* \* \* \*



After two phone calls and a quick meeting with her boss, Charlotte was strapped in his truck and on the way to his ranch. Normally Ty would have stayed to the very end of the rodeo, but for once, he had his own bucking beauty to ride.

They had to make another quick stop at her hotel room, where he insisted she check out. There was no way in the world he was going to let her go back there tonight, especially if this was to be their last night together. He insisted that she leave her car, but only because he didn't want her to sneak off in the dead of night. Ty wasn't going to put anything past Charlotte.

Ty's spread had always been his pride and joy. The Dollar Ranch had been in his family for three generations, and if God was willing, it would be in his family for another three to come. He loved his land and he wanted Charlotte to love it, too.

Pulling up in front of his home, Ty hopped out of the truck and walked around to open the door for Charlotte. Smiling her thanks, Charlotte took his hand and stepped out. Stepping away from the truck, Charlotte stared at her surroundings with a look of amazement and awe on her face. "Ty, it's lovely."

"Thank you." Ty had always thought so, but he was probably biased. The Dollar was set back on one hundred and fifty of the best acres God had ever created. His brick house was flanked by several outbuildings, and pastures stretched as far as the eye could see. It was his home and he loved it.

"You're a lucky man to have all this." Turning around in a semi-circle, Charlotte put her hands up to her eyes, framing them from the sun's fading rays.

"I've always thought so." Grabbing her bag from the back of the truck, Ty placed his hand on the small of her back, and led Charlotte up the walk to his home.

Ida, his housekeeper, met them at the door with a smile on her face. "I see we're having company," she said as she opened the door for them.

"That we are, Ida, I'd like to introduce you to Charlotte."

The older lady stuck out her hand to Charlotte, with a warm welcoming smile on her face. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you as well." Charlotte's voice held a hint of surprise in it, as if she was shocked by the warm welcome.

"Shall I ready the guest room?"

"No," Ty said, ignoring the glare Charlotte sent him. "She'll be staying in my room."

"Very well," Ida replied, with a twinkle in her eyes. She might have been from a different generation, but she was familiar with Ty's ways.

Charlotte's fuse was a lot longer than Ty gave her credit for. She actually lasted until Ida left the room before she turned on him. "I can't believe you said that."

"Said what?" Ty asked, setting her bag down by the stairs.

"That I'd be staying in your room. She's going to think ..."

"... That I'm a very lucky man," Ty interrupted, placing his finger against her full lips. "We don't stand on ceremony around here. Ida and her husband, Sly, who you'll meet later, have been on this land longer than I've been alive. They're not the judging type."

"Still ..."

"Still what?" Pulling her into his arms, Ty smiled down into her upturned face. "Something tells me you're just looking for a fight."

"What if I am?"

The challenge in her smile almost made him laugh out loud. Charlotte was a handful, and he loved it. "Then I'm just the man for it."

"Ty," Ida said, coming back into the hall. "Mr. Zellerman called. He wants you to call him back ASAP."

"Damn, honey, I have to take this call."

"I can show her to your room, while you make your call."

"Is that okay?" Ty asked, not wanting to put Charlotte on the spot.

Charlotte rolled her eyes at him. "I think I'm capable of being alone in your house for five minutes."

Ida's laughter sounded like a roar of approval. She had been known to be quite feisty in her day, as well. "I think I like your lady."

"Behave," Ty warned, looking at the two apples of his eye.

"Who are you talking to?" Charlotte asked.

"Both of you." With a wink, Ty headed down the hall to his office, with the sound of Ida's laughter in his ear.

By the time he finished his phone call more than five minutes had passed. Following the smell of dinner down the hall, Ty skipped his bedroom in lieu of the kitchen. The mouthwatering smell of pot roast wasn't the only reason he headed in that direction. Ty could hear Ida and Charlotte's laughter all the way down the hall. It was a sound that brought a smile to his face, and a warm sensation to his heart.

Ty would have never believed he would have fallen so quickly, but here he was, standing outside his kitchen with a stupid grin on face, all because of Charlotte's laughter. If the guys could see him now ...

He could hear Ida speaking as he entered the room, "And by the time his father made it over the fence, Ty was chin-deep in mud, squealing like a little pig."

Wincing, Ty wished he had been a few seconds earlier, he might have saved himself some embarrassment. "You're fired," he teased, walking all the way into the room.

Ida waved her hand at him. "Well, if you're going to fire me, then I'm going to have to tell her about the time Sly caught you and little Ann ..."

Rounding the island, Ty placed his hands over Ida's mouth, silencing the laughing woman. "Forget it. You're rehired and with a raise."

Ida winked at Charlotte as she pulled Ty's hand down from her mouth. "That's what I thought. Dinner is ready. Let me set you two up, and I'll take Sly's and my dinner out to our house."

"What? No!" Charlotte cried, looking at Ty to intervene. "Please don't do that on my account."

"You guys don't want to be saddled with us old folks."

Charlotte scurried down from her stool and around the counter. "Please join us."

Ida looked to Ty, who nodded his head in agreement. He was a bit shocked that Charlotte insisted, but glad just the same. Ida and Sly were more family than employees, and they had been eating with him since his parents passed away ten years ago. "Just think of all the embarrassing stories you can tell her over dinner."

With a faint blush, Ida conceded, "And what I can't remember, I'm sure Sly will fill in."

"Wonderful." Charlotte turned to look up at Ty with a huge smile she couldn't hold back any longer. Bending forward, Ty took her sweet lips under his, much to Ida's amusement and Charlotte's embarrassment.

Sitting out on the porch later that evening, Ty held Charlotte in his arms as they rocked on the swing.

"It's so very peaceful out here. I can see why you love it. And Ida and Sly have to be two of the nicest people I've ever met."

"They really like you." Leaning down, Ty kissed the top of Charlotte's head, feeling happier and more content than he had felt in awhile.

"You know this is never going to work." Charlotte voice broke the comfortable silence.

"It already is."

Her soft laughter made him smile. "It doesn't work because you say it does. We have too many differences to make this work."

"But we also have something more." Ty tilted her chin up so they were looking eye to eye. "Tell me you don't feel it."

"I feel it, all right," she teased, running her hand up his thigh. "But I'm still going to drive home tomorrow."

"And maybe you won't. Maybe you'll give me another day." And another. And another.

"It was just a one-night stand."

"Then why are you still here?" Ty asked, loving the way her brown eyes narrowed at the corners. She was going to fight this all the way.

"Because," she replied stubbornly, looking back out into the distance.

Ignoring her lack of reason, Ty pushed off the ground with his foot, sending the swing rocking again. "That's what I thought. Now sit back and enjoy the view."

"Sit back." Charlotte's eyebrows drew together. "Did I miss the part where you became the boss of me?"

Chuckling, Ty pulled Charlotte over onto his lap until she was straddling him. His cock hardened under his jeans instantly at the feel of her on top of him. "You must have, darlin', but let me refresh your memory."

## Chapter Five

"I'm leaving today, and I mean it, Ty," Charlotte warned, wagging her butter-coated toast at him.

"Sure you are," he teased. Grabbing her hand, he brought the toast to his mouth and took a bite. "That's what you said two days ago."

"I know, but I really mean it this time." Like she'd meant it the other dozen times she'd said it over the last week. "I really have to get back to the office. If Nathan wasn't so far gone himself, he'd have fired me days ago."

Now that Nathan was relocating to Santa Estrella, Charlotte's excuse for not going home was becoming weaker and weaker, as was her desire to return. Somewhere along the line, she had lost her taste for the hustle and bustle of city life and was fast becoming a convert to ranch life. She loved it there almost as much as she was beginning to love Ty.

"If he fires you, I'll hire you."

"You couldn't afford me, cowboy."

Ty waggled his brows teasingly. "I'm sure we could work out a payment plan."

Giggling, Charlotte bet they could. Ty was a very, very naughty boy, and fast becoming the best mistake she'd ever made. "How much longer are you planning to hold me hostage, cowboy?"

Snorting, Ty eyed Charlotte over his coffee cup. "I loosened the cuffs this morning, didn't I?"

"Shut up." Zinging the remaining piece of toast at him, Charlotte bopped Ty in the head. Blushing she glanced quickly over his shoulder to see if Ida had heard anything, but if she did, the housekeeper was keeping it to herself.

"You liked it, you know you did."

She had, but she would never admit it to him. Ty was too cocky by far. "I have no idea what you're referring to."

"Liar."

"Pest," Charlotte replied, sticking her tongue out at him.

"I can think of better things for you to do with your tongue." His gaze was on her mouth, his stare intense and sensual.

"I bet you could." A simple look, a single phrase, and she was becoming aroused.

"Don't make me separate you two," Ida threatened, as she gathered up her purse from the mudroom. "I'm off to the store. Do you need anything that isn't on the list?"

Ty looked at Charlotte and mouthed, *condoms and lube*, causing her to break out in another fit of laughter. They were fast running out of both, much to her embarrassment and amusement, just one more reason why Charlotte was finding it harder and harder to go home.

Sure there were reasons to go home, like her family, friends, and job, but there were even more tempting reasons here. Reasons that ensured she was smiling nonstop and coming up with every reason under the sun to stay a day or two longer.

"I should be back in about two hours." Stopping by Charlotte's chair, Ida asked with a smile, "Will you be here when I get back?"

"No." Charlotte really needed to get going.

But before the word had left her mouth, Ty interjected with, "Yes."

Laughing, Ida shook her head. "That's what I thought. I'll be back."

Charlotte waited until Ida left, before she reached out across the table and took Ty's callused hand in hers. "I'm going to have to leave one day, Ty."

"It doesn't have to be today," he replied stubbornly, refusing as always, to listen to reason.

Ty had made it clear, over the last few days, that if it were up to him, he would have all of her things shipped to his house, and her upstairs, chained to the bed. Okay, the "chained to the bed" part didn't sound so bad, but Charlotte did have a life to get back to, no matter how unappealing it was becoming. "You say that everyday."

"And I mean it everyday."

"I'm leaving today, Ty," Charlotte said firmly.

"No."

"This isn't up for debate."

Sitting back in his chair he regarded her stonily. "Don't you like it here?"

"You know I love it here, but I have plants to water, food to throw out, people to see."

"And then you'll be back?" It might have been a question, but it came off like a demand, causing steel to shoot straight up her spine.

"Eventually."

"Next weekend," he ordered calmly.

"Oh, is *that* when eventually is? I always wondered about that." If he was going to be stubborn about this, then she was going to be stubborn right back. Charlotte had every



intention of coming back next weekend, she just wasn't going to let Ty think he could boss her into it. Her hardheaded cowboy had a lot to learn when it came to women.

Charlotte stood, pushing her chair back, and took her plate and cup to the sink. With a few feet of distance between them, Charlotte turned back around to face him, with her resolve firmly in place, but instead of facing an angry Ty, she faced an amused one.

"You're cute, you know?" he said, as he stood up with his dishes and walked over to where she was.

Narrowing her eyes, Charlotte waited for the punch line, and when none came, she became even more suspicious. Ty didn't add a comment, didn't try to manhandle her, he simply went to the sink and rinsed out his coffee cup. Something was up. "Is that it?"

Shooting her an amused look, Ty walked back to the breakfast table and picked up his hat. "What do you mean?"

"No argument from you?"

"Do you want me to argue with you?"

Yes. No. Hell. Charlotte was more confused than when she started this conversation. "So you're okay with me going home today?"

"I'm not okay with it, Charlotte, but short of locking you in my bedroom, I can't stop you. I don't want you to think of the ranch as a prison. More like a haven."

Walking to him, Charlotte laid her head against his chest, loving the sound of his strong heartbeat against her ear. "You're making it very hard to leave."

A low chuckle rose from beneath her ear. "I hope so."

Ty held her to him for a second, and Charlotte, a person who wasn't used to leaning on another human being, let her heart open for him. She was finally beginning to understand the concept of love at first sight, even if she was too blind to recognize it at first.

Brushing his hand against her hair, Ty broke the comfortable silence. "I have to go check on my baby."

Startled, Charlotte pulled abruptly away from his chest. "Your what?"

"Chiana, my mare. We had to separate her from the other horses."

"Is she okay?" Now that Charlotte knew she didn't have any baby's momma's drama to worry about, she was filled with concern. She knew how much the Dollar meant to Ty, and anything that was important to him was fast becoming very important to her.

"Yeah, she ..." Pausing, Ty stepped back. "Do you want to come meet her?"

There was no law that said Charlotte needed to leave *right* now. "Of course."

With a lazy smile, Ty took her hand in his and headed outside. Charlotte would never get over the vast amounts of open space Ty called home. Even though there were stables, barns, and pastures everywhere, it still seemed as if Ty's property went on for days. Bypassing the large stable, they headed to a small red building resembling a mini barn, with the Dollar Bill monarch logo on the door, prompting a question Charlotte had been meaning to ask. "So where does the Dollar Ranch get its name?"

Pushing back the door, Ty led her down a small hallway to a single stall next to a tack room filled with hay. "My great-grandfather started this ranch with four quarter horses -- three mares and a stallion."

"So?" Charlotte questioned, not getting the correlation.

Unlatching the gate, Ty entered the stall with the russet mare. Looking over his shoulder at her with a devilish sparkle in his blue eyes, he answered her question. "What do four quarters equal?"

"A dollar ... oh, duh." Charlotte laughed. "The Dollar Ranch. I like it."

"I'm sure my grandfather would be pleased." Bending down, he picked up the horse's leg and checked it over. "Whoa, baby. I'm just here to check you out."

Leaning on the wooden gate, Charlotte watched Ty lovingly caress the mare. There was so much tenderness in his touch, and gentleness about him, that it was sometimes hard to see her passionate, dominating lover as the same man before her. "What happened?"

"A combination of things," Ty said standing back up. "A hired hand not paying attention, a mare in heat, but not in the mood, and a randy stallion who wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Kinda like his owner, huh?" Charlotte teased. Reaching slowly across the gate as Ty had shown her, Charlotte allowed the horse to get accustomed to her scent before delicately stroking her muzzle. "What's wrong, honey? Not in the mood for some loving?"

"Horses generally don't mate in the winter," Ty said, coming out of the stall.

"Why not?"

"Because they're pregnant for about eleven months. So for racing and showing it's best to have the mare foal early, say January or February. Hence we normally breed them between February and March."

Ty slid up behind Charlotte, trapping her between his body and the gate. Her pulse began to race as it normally did when Ty was near, but the feel of him, heavy and aroused, was causing her heart to work overtime. "So did someone forget to tell the stallion?"

Nuzzling her neck, Ty teased her senses causing her nipples to harden beneath her blouse. "Like his owner, Slate doesn't always care what's right or wrong. He only knows what he wants, and he'll do anything to get it."

"Sounds just like you," Charlotte murmured, burrowing into Ty's warmth. It seemed as if a lifetime had passed since they'd last made love instead of mere hours, and Charlotte was aching to have him inside of her again. "Temptation will get you every time."

She was driving him wild. And it wasn't as if she was actually doing anything. Just knowing she was within his reach, ready and willing, was all it took to keep Ty hard all week long. They'd made love more times than he could count, and each time was better than the time before. She was sweet, insatiable, and the keeper of his heart, but she was also hell-bent on going home.

Every time she mentioned going home, Ty found a way to distract her, but this time he could tell she was serious and it was driving him insane. He was only seconds away from tossing her over his shoulder and carting her off to the nearest minister he could find, but Ty knew he needed to be patient and give her time to make the decision for herself. Even if it was killing him.

Slipping his hand around her lithe waist, Ty pulled her body closer to his own. It was getting ridiculously obscene the way his body reacted to hers. Just thinking her name caused his cock to stir. "It's been too long," he whispered into her downy brown hair.

Charlotte moaned her agreement, passionately pushing back into him. Nudging her legs wider apart, he pressed his hand against her mons, cupping her sex through her jeans. "Time to give in to a bit of temptation of our own."

"Here?" Her question came out as more of a moan, causing his erection to pulsate. He loved the sound of her voice, especially when it held a hint of passion in it as it did now.

"I won't be satisfied until I've fucked you everywhere." Backing away, Ty led Charlotte around the corner to the hay holding area, next to Chiana's stall. The area wasn't a complete room with doors, but it was a bit further back from the door and away from prying eyes.

"Get out of those pants." Yanking his shirt over his head, Ty reached into his back pocket and pulled out a condom, one of the many he'd taken to carting around the ranch since her arrival.

Looking around at their surroundings, Charlotte shook her head in mirth. "We are not doing this here."

"Aren't we?" He was so hard right now, he couldn't see straight. The woman he adored, in a room with rope, leather, and hay, was wreaking havoc on his libido. The horse wrangler in him wanted to mount her like a stallion takes a mare, strong, demanding, and in complete control.

"I'm not getting freaky in the hay." Her voice sounded appalled, yet the passion was still in simmering in her big brown eyes. "I'll be sneezing and coughing, instead of screaming and coming."

"Don't worry." If a little hay fever was what she was worried about, he could fix that really quick. "You won't have to."

Picking his shirt up off of the ground, Ty laid it against the bale, spreading it out like a blanket until the majority of the hay was covered.

"That's not long enough for me to lie on."

"Who said anything about laying?" Dropping the condom on his shirt, Ty did what his heart was craving and pulled Charlotte in for a kiss.

His mouth covered hers as he slipped his tongue between her full lips. Swaying into him, Charlotte parted her mouth, flooding his senses with her sweet taste. It was a flavor Ty was fast becoming addicted to.

Pulling reluctantly away, Ty reached between them, making quick work of her pants, unbuckling and pushing them down her lovely brown legs. Quickly followed by her shirt and underclothes, Charlotte was aroused and naked, awaiting his touch. She shivered a bit in the cool air, but Ty was confident he could have them warm in seconds.

"This is crazy," Charlotte murmured, clinging to his body as he sat her up on his shirt. "Someone could come in."

She talked as she unbuttoned his pants, freeing his member into her waiting hands. Her touch was like firm silk, and he couldn't help but grin at her actions. Ty would never have to wonder if their passion was just one-sided; Charlotte was almost as greedy for him as he was for her.

"I guarantee you no one will interrupt us." If they did, they'd risk more than his wrath. Everyone on the Dollar Ranch knew better than to interrupt Ty for any reasons short of a

colic epidemic when he was with Charlotte. He'd hate to lose a man, but he'd hate for them to see his woman naked even more.

Reaching in his back pocket, Ty pulled out his yellow bandana and began to unfold it, watching Charlotte's face the entire time. The closer he stepped to her, the deeper she began to breathe. Her arousal filled the air, teasing his mind like mad.

"Give me your hands, Charlotte," he ordered, sounding a lot calmer than he felt.

Without a moment of hesitation or a word of protest, Charlotte juttied out her hands, surrendering her willpower to his command. It never ceased to amaze him how she gave her trust so completely, yet was still afraid to give her heart the same way.

Quickly binding her hands together, Ty lifted her off the shirt and spun her around, until she was facing the wall, bent over the bale of hay. Her pert brown ass was positioned for the perfect fucking, but he wanted inside her pussy more. Ty needed to remind both of them just who she belonged to.

Grabbing the condom from his shirt, Ty ripped through the foil, impatiently sliding the ribbed condom onto his hard shaft. "I can't get over how beautiful you are," Ty murmured as he moved toward her, aroused and eager. "And this ass ..."

Bending down, he nipped at her firm cheek, rousing a hoarse chuckle from her before standing up again and positioning himself at her moist entrance. Grasping her hip, Ty angled her body for a smooth entrance. Her height was a bit of a disadvantage, but he knew once he was inside her tight sheath, he'd be able to maneuver her into a position they both would love.

Before pushing in, Ty slid his cock through the cream-coated lips of her sex. Teasing her engorged clit with the ribbed edges of the condom, Ty could feel the tremors quaking through her body.

"Don't tease me," she demanded, as she pushed backwards trying to get him to slip in. Her warm center called to him, beseeching him to enter, but Ty wanted Charlotte to be as far gone as he was.

He also wanted her to know who was in charge. Lightly smacking her ass with one hand, Ty pushed down on the center of her smooth back, holding her in place with the other. He liked her tied up and docile at his command. "How badly do you want it?"

"Damn it, Ty, don't fuck with me," she growled, looking over her shoulder at him like the fierce kitten she was. Ty loved it.

"You know what I want, sugar?" he asked, tormenting her clit with his cock. "Beg me. Tell me what you need."

"You. Inside of me, now!"

Raising her ass higher, Ty gripped her hips and drove into her moist center, almost stopping his heart in the process. It was always like that, the first surge into her body was all-consuming. The hot swath of her sex made Ty feel like his entire body was on fire.

Charlotte gripped the hay to steady herself, as he powered into her from behind. In this position, he was in complete control of the rhythm and motion, just the way he liked it. Moaning, she cried out, "God, yes. Fuck me harder. Fuck ... me."

"Harder, sweet baby? Is this what you want?" He panted, speeding up his rhythm per her request.

Charlotte's guttural moans of appreciation were all he needed to hear to know she was right there with him. Gripping his fingers into the light brown globes of her ass, he looked down and watched as his pale shaft disappeared into her dark sex. The difference in their skin color provided the perfect contrast to highlight his cock driving in and out of her.

"Mine. Mine. Mine." His brain parroted over and over in his head, beating the words like a drum into his mind.

Pushing harder into her he quickened the pace, until he could no longer tell if he was coming or going. Charlotte had given up on all pretense of decorum and was crying his name with every thrust.

Raising his hand, he brought it down sharply against the curve of her bottom, sending Charlotte screaming over the edge. She came in a loud, orgasmic rush moments ahead of Ty, who rode her until their knees buckled.

Catching himself with his hands on the hay, Ty leaned forward and laid his head on her damp, quaking back as the aftershocks rocked through them. He could feel her lissome body quivering underneath him, and it made him want to gather her up and place her on the tallest shelf, to keep her safe from all harm.

This was his woman -- *his woman* -- and what they had was too good to give up. It wasn't just sex. Sex he could get anywhere at any time. It was something more. Charlotte aroused his mind and his heart, as well as his cock, and she wasn't something he was willing to do without.

Distance be damned. Ty wasn't going to let Charlotte mosey her way out of his life, no matter what.



## Chapter Six

Despite every single one of her misgivings and doubts, somehow Charlotte and Ty were making it work. With the right motivation, the three-hour drive seemed to take mere minutes, especially when she knew Ty was waiting for her back at the ranch. Charlotte did most of the commuting, but she didn't mind. The mileage was worth it to be back in his arms.

But today, today he was coming to her turf, and Charlotte had to admit she was a bit nervous. On the ranch they could pretend like the world didn't exist, but here in Los Angeles they wouldn't have such a luxury. It wasn't the city she was worried about, so much as his reaction to her life.

Things in Charlotte's part of the world worked a bit differently than they did in Santa Estrella. Her work and life was an important part of her, or it used to be, and she wanted Ty to see it firsthand. Maybe then he would understand why she still kept coming back. Although Charlotte had to admit, even to herself, that it was becoming increasingly difficult to find a reason to come back home. So much so that Charlotte was at the point where she didn't even understand why she was fighting her feelings for Ty any longer.

“He’ll get here when he gets here,” Tamara teased slipping out onto the balcony, where Charlotte had snuck out from the office party for a few minutes of peace and quiet. “Geez Louise, woman, get off the man’s jock. You act like you haven’t seen him in years.”

The cool night air drifted over her bare shoulders, causing her to shiver a bit. California was a warm state, but even here it got cold in December, especially in an after-five party dress, a dress that Charlotte had bought specifically with Ty in mind.

The black, knee-length, strapless dress was as simple to take off as it was to put on, and that was something she thought Ty would really appreciate. Rubbing her arms, she turned to her friend and smiled. “Five days can be a very, very long time.”

Snorting, Tamara’s lovely face showed her disbelief. As Charlotte’s unofficial back-up date, she was decked out in her evening finery as well, her pleasantly plump figure accentuated in a two-piece forest-green pantsuit. “He must be king ding-a-ling, because you’re all kinds of sprung.”

“I’m not ...” Pausing in mid-sentence Charlotte gave Tamara’s comment a bit of thought. “Well, maybe I am, but you just don’t know ...”

“Know what?”

Know what it was like to be in his arms. Know what it was like to be loved and made love to by one of the best men she’d ever known. There was so much Tamara didn’t know, and there wasn’t enough time in either of their lifetimes for Charlotte to fill her in. “He’s just great. Just wait, you’ll see.”

“Hell, I’ve been waiting to see since the end of November, and if he’s not worth it, trust me, you’ll hear about it,” Tamara promised with a wink.

Charlotte wasn’t worried about whether or not Tamara and Ty would get along. They were both such easygoing people that it would be hard for them not to like each other. “He should have been here twenty minutes ago. I wonder if something happened at the ranch.”

A large grin spread across Tamara’s face, prompting Charlotte ask, “What’s so funny?”

"You are." Leaning back against the rail, Tamara crossed her arms over her large chest. "You're wondering if your boyfriend had problems on the ranch. The ranch, for Christ's sake. That's funny as hell."

"Shut up." Charlotte was thankful for the low lighting that was hiding her flush. Saying it like that did seem sort of funny.

"I mean, did you ever see a horse close up, before your visit with the Ingalls?" Tamara ribbed with a grin. "You're the woman who won't go camping unless you're sleeping in a cabin."

"It's not like we're roughing it on his ranch, Tamara. He does have indoor plumbing, smartass."

"But can you see yourself staying out there, like forever?"

Yes, her heart and mind answered at the same time, shocking Charlotte into silence. Looking over at Tamara who had lost all trace of her smile, Charlotte could only stare dumbfounded. She was in love with him, and she wanted to be with him forever. When the hell did that happen?

"Charlotte," Tamara's voice held amazement and disbelief. "You're not in love with him, are you?"

"Charlotte," a voice called from the open doorway, saving Charlotte from answering. Turning, she raised a questioning brow to her co-worker, Val, who was smiling broadly at her. "I think your guest is here."

Looking past Val's shoulder, Charlotte saw Ty standing in the center of the room and almost swallowed her tongue. He was dressed in a dark suit like the majority of the men in the room, but unlike everyone else, he was wearing his black Stetson. Charlotte thought it was damn impossible for him to look any better than the way she had seen him in the past. She had been wrong. Dead wrong.

He didn't just wear the suit. He *wore* the suit. His suit accentuated his large frame, making it seem as if it were molded for his body alone. And the hat that adorned his head, made him appear dashing and debonair. Ty looked fucking great.

Tamara pushed up behind her, staring across the room. "Is that ... is that him?" The awe in her voice broke Charlotte's hypnotic stare.

"Yes," Charlotte's voice sounded almost as bad as Tamara's did. "That's my cowboy."

"Oh ... my ... God."

"You can say that again," Val agreed, fanning herself with her hand. The blonde woman was eyeing Ty like he was a Prada bag on clearance. "I didn't know they made men like that anymore."

"They don't," Charlotte said, pushing past the fawning woman and into the crowded room. "He's a dying breed."

Ty was searching the room for her, giving Charlotte ample time to study him as she approached. Watching him with new eyes, eyes of love, Charlotte wondered what had taken her so long to realize what he meant to her. It wasn't like she'd ever made such an effort with any other man in her life. That alone should have told her of her feelings, but now that she knew, now that she really knew, she just wanted to bask in the glow.

She was in love.

Charlotte was almost to his side before he spotted her, but when he did, his entire face lit up with joy. It was the most beautiful sight Charlotte had ever seen. Her man, happy to see her. Coming to his side, Charlotte stood up on her tiptoes and placed a warm kiss against his firm lips. Although she wanted to strip him bare and have her wicked way with him right there where they stood, she knew she couldn't, so she kept her kiss quick, not wanting to tempt herself more than she already was.

Pulling back, she smiled up at him. "Hi, stranger."

Ty encircled her waist, holding her to him, and smiled back at her. "Sorry I'm late."

"I didn't even notice," she lied, no longer caring how long it took him to get there, just thankful that he was.

"You look beautiful."

"As do you. I didn't know you owned a suit," she kidded stepping back to admire him up close.

"My good jeans were at the cleaners."

"I bet. You know ..." Charlotte took his hand in hers, about to say something else, when she noticed the boisterous party had seemed to die down a bit. Glancing around she saw several people avert their eyes quickly, as if they hadn't been staring. Smiling mischievously, Charlotte couldn't help but to agitate the situation a little. "Good thing I like being center of attention."

"I think we should give them something to really stare at." Ty leaned forward and covered her mouth with his own before she could utter a word, and the second his lips touched hers, Charlotte lost all will to.

All thoughts of their surroundings, of the people staring, all fell to the wayside as she gave in to Ty's demanding kiss. She was becoming an addict to his kisses. It had only been five days, as Tamara noted, since she had last seen him and yet she couldn't stop kissing him. She didn't want to.

Ty was the first to break away, which was a good thing, because Charlotte could have kissed him all night. "I think we got their attention."

"I'd say," Tamara called from behind her.

Flushed, Charlotte backed up a step, desperate to get some air to her burning lungs. "We were just trying to prove a point."

"What, that you two need to either go to a hotel or charge a fee?" Winking at Charlotte, Tamara held her hand out to Ty. "Hello, I'm the best friend, confidante, and one of the many women who are gnashing their teeth in envy."

Roaring with laughter, Ty took her hand in his own. "It's very nice to meet you at long last, Tamara. I've heard many good things about you."

"Not as good as some of things I've heard about you, I bet."

"Really?" Turning his smiling blue eyes toward Charlotte, Ty asked, "What has she said?"

"She's said --" interjected Charlotte, refusing to allow Tamara to get started, "-- that if my so-called friend says anything, she will die a slow death. A very slow and painful death."

"You never let me have any fun," Tamara pouted. Sighing, she turned back to Ty. "Would you care to dance?"

"It would be an honor," Ty said, taking her hand and placing it in the crook of his arm. "I'll be back."

"I'll be here." Charlotte smiled, glad to see that the two of them were getting along.

The two of them no sooner made it to the dance floor, than Charlotte was suddenly surrounded by several of her female co-workers. "Who is he?" one of them asked boldly.

Charlotte turned to the lusting women and said the one thing she thought they needed to know. "He's mine."

There were too many men staring at Charlotte's ass for Ty's peace of mind. Not that he couldn't take any or all of them at any given time; he'd just hate to spoil her little party with a blood bath. A party that was becoming increasingly closed in by the second, thanks to the women who wouldn't leave him alone. Too many people, not enough space, and way too many hands accidentally brushing his ass were beginning to wear on his nerves.

Once was a mistake. Twice he could chalk up to an accident. But the third time, the third time would be considered molestation in any court of law. It was almost as if the damn women had never seen a cowboy hat before. Things were so bad, he was leaning against the

wall just to preserve the little dignity he had left. Ty now officially knew what a side of beef felt like.

"Having fun?" Tamara asked, handing him a bottle of beer. Where she had gotten a bottle of Coors at this party was beyond him, but Ty was really thankful that she had.

"Of course. I always like to be pawed on Saturdays." Taking a deep swig, Ty moved over on the wall, allowing the sassy lady to join his wall-holding party.

From the short conversations he'd had with Tamara over the last hour or so, Ty was sure he was in for a treat. She had a funny way of looking at things, and seemed utterly incapable of keeping a thought to herself. And everything she'd said so far had made him laugh, and he was sure this time wouldn't be much different. Thankfully, she didn't make him wait too long.

"Well I'm here to protect you, until Charlotte's done with the deal. Anybody who reaches for your ass again will draw back a nub." Her big brown eyes squinted in what Ty assumed was supposed to be a fierce glare.

"Then I thank you beforehand for protecting my virtue."

"Virtue." She laughed in her soft husky way. "From the tales Charlotte's been sharing with me, there's not much left to your virtue. I'm just making my sure my girl's property is protected."

"Are you willing to fight to the death?"

"Of course." As if God was testing her word, a statuesque redhead who'd been eyeing him all night flitted her way over to them. Before she could get a word out though, Tamara growled, "Back off, Ariel," shocking the woman and Ty, who immediately roared with laughter.

The woman's intake of breath was damn near audible, causing Ty to laugh harder as she backed up and stormed away. Everyone seemed to turn in their direction, which was even more amusing now that Tamara was wearing an angelic smile.

"I think I like you," he finally got out as he calmed down, and tears of amusement shimmered in his eyes. He could see why Charlotte liked Tamara. She was good people. Open, honest, and funny as hell, she reminded him a lot of Charlotte.

"Keep Charlotte happy, and I'll like you right back." Slipping him a sly glance, Tamara probed further. "Speaking of Charlotte, what are your intentions toward her?"

"To make her happy for as long as I live," Ty stated with all honesty. There was no doubt in his mind where their relationship was heading. He wanted, needed Charlotte in his life for the long run. She was his. Just as much as he was hers.

"Wow." Tamara stared at him with shock on her face. "I think I like you already."

"I hope so. Can't have you spending weekends on the ranch if you don't."

Tamara just snickered. "I so don't think so. You're not converting me to the dark side."

"What dark side?" Charlotte asked, joining them.

"Your boy here is on a mission to bring all the black folks to the other side."

"Not all, just two," Ty said with grin. Pulling Charlotte into him, he rested his head on top of her hair, breathing in her tropical scent. "Can we blow this pop stand, or are we here for the long run?"

"We can definitely leave. I've schmoozed enough for one night, and all I want to do is to go home and climb into bed."

Squeezing her to him, Ty murmured, "I like that idea."

"Okay, that's enough, you two. Unless you really want the women slicing their wrists in envy, you need to take that shit home. Have some sympathy for us celibate, horny women."

Charlotte's soft laughter filtered up toward Ty, filling his senses with her being. All he wanted to do was to undress her and make love -- hell, as short as her dress was, he didn't even have to undress her to make love, but he'd do it anyway, just for the added pleasure.



They quickly said their goodbyes to everyone, and after walking Tamara to her car, Ty and Charlotte climbed into his black sedan. The car had barely started before Charlotte slipped off her shoes and made herself comfortable in her seat. Sighing prettily, she turned in the seat until she was facing him.

"Thank you for coming tonight. I'm sorry I spent most of the evening talking to clients. I know it couldn't have been much fun for you."

"I had a really good time. Tamara is a lot of fun."

"Isn't she though?" Charlotte's voice held a hint of laughter in it, and after meeting Tamara, Ty completely understood. "You weren't too bored, then, huh?"

"Not too bored, no. Definitely not any less bored than you'll be when the situation is reversed and we're at a party for the ranch."

"I don't know. If all the men look as good as you did tonight, I'm sure I can find something to do to occupy my time."

"Brat," he teased. Reaching over, Ty placed his hands on her thigh and lovingly caressed her.

When Ty pulled up to the exit of the parking lot, he paused, turning to look at Charlotte, whose eyes were closed. "Baby," he whispered, nudging her thigh with his hand. "I'm going to need directions to where we're going."

"Hmmm ..." she yawned, opening her eyes for a few seconds before shutting them again. "We're going home."

Rubbing his hand back and forth over her thigh, Ty smiled down at his own personal sleeping beauty. "I haven't been to your house before," he reminded her gently.

"Not my house," she murmured, snuggling deeper in her seat. "I want to go home. To your house."

Ty froze, startled to hear Charlotte refer to his house as home. It was pleasing, but surprising nonetheless. “To the ranch, darlin’?” Ty wanted to make sure he heard her correctly.

“Yes. Home.”

Home. The words sounded like poetry on her lips. “Home, it is.”

The dashboard clock flashed the time at Ty, and despite the late hour, he was feeling wide-awake. Awake and strangely exhilarated. Ty didn’t know what kind of epiphany Charlotte had come to, but whatever was making his brown-eyed beauty sing her new little tune, he was all for it. It was about damn time, too.

He wanted her to think of the Dollar as home, as their home, because he had already begun to think of it that way. All they needed to do now, in his opinion, was to wrangle up a judge and make it legal. The sooner the better, too, as far as he was concerned.

These little jaunts of hers back and forth to LA were beginning to cause wear and tear on his well-being. Sometimes it felt as if he wasn’t whole until she was back home with him.

The three-hour trip seemed to pass by in the blink of an eye, and before he knew it, Ty was driving through the gates of the ranch. Parking the car, Ty took a minute to watch Charlotte sleep, her ample chest rising and falling with each breath, a soft sawing noise drifting up from between her lips. She was just as adorable asleep as she was awake.

Leaning over, Ty brushed the back of his knuckles against her soft cheek, tenderly calling her name. “Wake up, sleepyhead. We’re here.”

Charlotte rolled opened her eyes and looked over at him sleepily. “Where are we?”

“We’re home.”

## Chapter Seven

Charlotte awoke to Ty's teasing tongue tormenting her aroused clit. Closing her eyes again, she reached between her splayed thighs and tugged on his thick hair, bringing him closer to her aching center. What a way to start the day.

Ty chuckled against her, sending chills coursing throughout her sensitive mound. Shivering she dug her toes into the warm sheet, pushing up into his torturing mouth, as she rolled her head back and forth against the pillow in pleasure.

Her body trembled in ecstasy as Ty feasted on her. He dallied around her aroused bud before traveling down her hot center and slipping into her soaked sex. He toyed with her. Keeping her on edge, giving her pleasure, giving her pain, never giving her all at the same time, practically forcing the orgasm to rip from her body. And when it came, it came like a crashing wave, washing over her fiercely yet thoroughly, encasing her entire body with pleasure. Languishing in the aftermath, Charlotte felt weak, which was funny since she hadn't done anything but lie there and receive pleasure. Life was good.

"Good morning," she whispered opening her eyes, watching Ty stare up at her from between her spread thighs. His mouth glazed with her juices, his eyes were alight with love.

"I'd say," he teased, before blowing gently on her clit.

“Stop,” she mumbled, pushing at him. There was only so much a woman could take in a span of a single minute.

“I don’t think so. I’m never going to stop.” Moving up her body, between her legs, Ty leaned over her. “You’re mine. Forever.”

“I think I’m okay with that.” Smiling, Charlotte wrapped her legs around his lean hips. “Does that mean you’re going to wake me up every morning like this?”

“I think I can arrange that.” Ty nudged the head of his cock against her slick opening, and pushed forward. Their groans filled the air as he filled her snug depths with his hard member, and for a moment, neither of them spoke, both lost in the sensation of the other.

It had been a week and a half since her Christmas party and two days before the holiday itself, and Charlotte couldn’t be happier. They had finally come to an agreement about the living arrangements, and after New Year’s, she was going to close up shop on her LA lifestyle and give ranch living a go.

With Nathan relocating to Santa Estrella it was the perfect time for Charlotte to make the move. She would be able to keep her job and be with Ty, the best of both worlds, all within her grasp. Life just didn’t get much better than that.

They were even talking about marriage, or rather, Ty was talking about it, but Charlotte hadn’t said yes yet. She wanted to take things slower. A bit too slow for Ty’s liking, but he was dealing ... or his version of dealing, anyway.

Gripping both of her hands in one of his massive ones, Ty held her hands over her head, holding her down to the bed. “You know, if you marry me, I can promise you wonderful orgasms like that on a daily basis.”

Leaning down, he took her elongated nipple in his mouth, teasing the aroused peak with his lips. His teeth nibbled at her aching tip, before suckling it to a feverish peak, then releasing it to move to its twin. Moaning, Charlotte arched up to him, testing his grip on her

wrists. She loved it when he held her down like this. It made her feel so vulnerable, but safe at the same time. Ty would never hurt her ... unless she begged him to.

"I'm getting them anyway," she groaned, clenching her muscles around his throbbing cock. The heat building in the nadir of her pussy was threatening to take over her entire body.

"You know, you're just making this harder on yourself. You're going to give in soon. I can feel it in my bones," he panted, speeding up his rhythm.

"I don't think that's your bone you're feeling."

"I love you," he murmured, staring into her eyes. His grip on her wrists tightened, but Charlotte didn't mind. He loved her.

"I love you, too," she replied, looking up into his adoring blue eyes.

His eyes narrowed as he focused on what she'd whispered. "Tell me," he demanded, pushing into her again. "Tell me again."

Charlotte complied, moaning, "I love you," over and over as he plunged into her. She was unable to deny Ty the words he longed to hear. Everything of hers was his. Her body, her soul, her mind belonged to Ty, a few words wouldn't make that much of a difference.

Tightening her legs around his waist, Charlotte met him thrust for thrust, milking his cock with the walls of her pussy. Each stroke brought her closer to the passion she had only truly experienced in Ty's arms.

"So fucking good," he muttered. "So good."

Charlotte couldn't agree more. She trembled at his words, taking every inch of his cock her hot little box could handle. "Harder," she pleaded, waiting to take him as deep and as hard as he could give.

Ty gave her what she craved, and Charlotte came, exploding beneath him as he exploded in her. Clenching his teeth, Ty shuddered as he pressed into her once more, her name a cry on his lips.

He collapsed besides her, looking as tired as she felt. "You're going to marry me," Ty demanded, his voice not daring her to disagree.

"I know," Charlotte admitted with a secret smile of her own. "I just wanted you to work for my yes, first."

After great sex and a long, relaxing shower, Charlotte was ready to climb right back into her bed and pass out again, but duty called. Strolling down the hall, Charlotte stopped in front of Ty's office, knocking on the door before she entered.

"Ah, there she is." Ty and his lawyer, Russell Crichton, stood, smiling at her as she walked in the door. He was too busy looking at her to notice the look of shock on the faces of his business associates, but Charlotte didn't miss it. "Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to my fiancée, Charlotte. Charlotte, this is Dean Zellerman and his father, Beaumont. And Russell you've already met."

Charlotte nodded to Russell, but her gaze never left the Zellermans. Recovering quickly, the older of the two men hid his shock behind a mask of disdain. It was a look that Charlotte had seen a million times in her lifetime, but one she hadn't been prepared for here. It was earth-shattering. A real wake-up call on the eve of the beautiful dream Ty had inspired inside of her. Hiding her hurt beneath a cool façade, Charlotte stuck out her hand, forcing the man to either shake it or look like an ass.

"Good afternoon." Take that, you narrow-minded prick. She'd kill him with kindness and watch him choke on it, with a smile.

He shook her hand quickly, barely holding on to her hand for a second. His companion, though, was different. He looked like a younger version of the first man, and he smiled warmly at her as he shook her hand. His behavior almost made up for the older gentleman's ... almost.

Walking over to Ty, Charlotte could see that he sensed something was wrong. She didn't want to worry him though. So, instead, she put on a brave front and smiled, loosely wrapping her arm around his waist.

"The Zellers are interested in investing in the Dollar."

"Well, we're still in talks," the elder Zeller interrupted, shocking Ty and his son both. But Charlotte wasn't shocked. There was nothing about his behavior that was surprising at all.

"In talks?" Russell questioned, his confusion shared with two of the other men in the room. "I was under the impression that we were done with talks."

Flushing, the man looked over at Charlotte before glancing away. "Papers haven't been signed yet. I might need a bit more time."

"Time, huh?" Ty's words were as sharp as a blow, his gaze cutting through the older man like a fiery torch. "Seconds before my fiancée walked into the room, you were creaming to sign on, but now, now you need more time."

"I ... I ..." Stumbling over his words, Beaumont looked from Charlotte to Ty as if trying to come up with his story.

"We do want to sign," Dean interjected, looking at his father with distaste in his eyes. "As you know, Tyson, I'm in charge of the company these days; my father is a mere ... figurehead." He added the last word as if it were repugnant.

"Then perhaps you need a new figurehead." Enclosing Charlotte's icy hand with his own, Ty faced the Zellers head-on, sealing his fate and hers. "But I think I'll have to decline your offer. I'm not sure if you're the right company for the Dollar."

"Wait ..."

Charlotte had heard enough. "Excuse me," she whispered, before bolting out of the room, to the surprise of everyone.

What had she been thinking? Things were never going to change, not even in the middle of nowhere on a ranch. And now their love was costing Ty money, money she knew he needed to expand the land like he wanted. Running up the stairs, Charlotte was in the room before she knew it, staring at nothing and everything all at the same time.

Tears ran down her face as she glanced at the bed where they had just professed their love, where she had less than an hour ago accepted his proposal, and Charlotte wanted to die. The pain was so intense it almost brought her to her knees. Opening the closet door, she gathered her clothes, intent on packing and going home, when she heard the bedroom door shut behind her.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Turning around slowly, she faced the man she loved and did the only thing she could think of to salvage his life. “I’m leaving.”

Ty couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so upset. What had started out as a great day was quickly heading down the shitter, one flush at a time. He had really been counting on the money from the investors to branch out a bit more. It would have been well spent on staff and horses, but he would never stoop so low as to work with a closed-minded prig like Beaumont. Not for any amount of money.

His ranch meant the world to him, but Charlotte meant the galaxy, and Ty would rather lose everything than be without her.

The deal with the Zellermans was over, as far as Ty was concerned. He really liked Dean. Ty knew he had the gift of making money hand over fist, but Beaumont was one sorry son-of-a-bitch whose name Ty wouldn’t have his ranch associated with.

The moment he had seen the look of distaste on Beaumont’s face was the moment the deal went south. And despite Dean’s protest, Ty wasn’t going to change his mind. He’d get the backing from someone else, or not expand at all. It was just that simple.



Or at least he thought it was. Now looking at Charlotte's tear-soaked face, Ty was lost. How could she think of leaving, when he'd willingly give up everything for her? "What is this all about?"

Charlotte gripped her clothes to her like they were a lifeline. Stepping toward her, Ty stopped in his tracks when she held her hand up to ward him off. What the hell was going on here?

"Talk to me, Charlotte."

Shrugging her shoulders, she looked down at the clothes, refusing to meet his eyes. "What do you want me to say?"

"You can start with why the hell you're gathering your things?" he fumed. He was in no mood to play guessing games.

Charlotte raised her head to look at him. "It's over, Ty."

Ty froze, his body pausing in mid-motion. Even his breathing seemed to still as he stared at her from across the room. "What did you say?"

His words where sharp, like the crack of a whip, bringing a fresh round of tears to Charlotte eyes. He hadn't meant to make her cry, but he was too worked up to comfort her right now. How could she say that? Think that?

"I said, it's over. We're over."

"Never."

"You say that now, but what will you say next month or the month after that when you find doors closing to you everywhere you turn?"

Ty felt the tension leave his body. This he could fix. "I rejected their offer, Charlotte, and kicked them off our land."

"Your land."

"Our land," he reinstated, not willing to let something as stupid as Beaumont's prejudices ruin their relationship. "Nothing's changed."

“Everything’s changed. I thought things would be different here. That it wouldn’t matter here.”

“They don’t matter here.”

Charlotte gave a sad little smile. “It matters everywhere.”

Ty felt as if a cold fist was gripping his heart. She was completely serious, and utterly scared. “He’s just one person, Charlotte. One.”

Shaking her head, Charlotte watched him with sad look on her face. “That one sale would have helped you bring your dream to life.”

“You’re the only dream I want to bring to life.” Ignoring everything she said, Ty walked over to her and took her in his arms. Pulling her into his embrace, Ty held her to him, trying to stop the terror that was taking hold of his soul. “I love you, Charlotte. Nothing else matters.”

“Stop it, Ty,” she cried, jerking herself out of his arms.

“Do you really think I care whether or not that deal goes through?” His fear quickly turned to anger. This was fucking ridiculous. “Or, better yet, do you think I want to do business with a man like that? Hell, no.”

Charlotte reached out and caressed Ty’s cheek as tears trailed down hers. “Do you really think that he’s going to be the only one? There’s a world full of Zellermans, and you can’t afford to tell them all to fuck off.”

“This is just an excuse you’re using to run.” Ty grabbed her hand, and pressed it firmly to his cheek. “It’s what you always do when things get rough, Charlotte, you run. But you can’t run from me. I won’t let you.”

“Ty, I’m never going to fit into your world, any more than you would willingly fit into mine. You love this ranch, and it’s a part of who you are. If you lost it because of me, you would end up resenting me, and I could never handle that.”

“But you can handle leaving me?”

"No, but I have to. For both of our sakes. I love you, Ty."

"Liar," he thundered, pushing her hand away. "If you loved me you'd stay. You'd forget this foolishness and we'd find a way to work this out."

"We can't fight the world. And it's silly of you to think we can."

"Silly. Don't talk to me about silliness. This whole damn conversation, argument, is silly."

"Why won't you listen to reason?"

Ty stared at her in amazement. Reason. What the hell did she know of reason? "Are you even listening to yourself? Less than two hours ago we were lying in that bed making plans for our future, and now you're talking about leaving because people won't like the fact that we're not the same race."

"I could deal with them not liking it, but I can't deal with you suffering because of it."

"Like you give a damn about me suffering." Turning, Ty jerked open the door and stormed out of the bedroom.

To hell with her. To hell with the whole damn thing. If she was going to toss their relationship away because she was scared, then he didn't need her. Life was scary, and Ty wanted a woman who would ride into a storm with him, not cower at the first sign of rain.

In time, he would stop hurting.

Barreling into his office, he slammed the door shut behind him. It was a good thing the office was empty, because if he had seen either of the Zellers, older or younger, Ty would have put his foot through their asses.

Walking to the bar in his office, Ty poured himself a glass of whiskey, staring down into the russet liquor that reminded him so much of Charlotte's eyes.

"Is everything okay?" Russell asked, coming up behind Ty. So intent on his thought, Ty hadn't heard anyone enter. "You okay, man?"

“Fine.” Taking a deep drink, Ty turned to look at his worried friend. “Everything is fine. Did you get them off my land?”

“Yeah, much to the dismay of Dean. He’ll be kicking his father’s ass all the way back to Sacramento.”

“A man after my own heart.”

“Is Charlotte okay?” He repeated his question.

“She’s just fine. She should be down in a bit, bags in hand.”

Russell eyes widened in surprise. “She can’t blame you.”

Ty chuckled harshly. “Oh, no, she doesn’t blame me. See, she’s too busy saving me.”

“From?”

“The world.” Tightening his grip on the glass, Ty could feel himself getting angrier by the second. “Charlotte’s under the impression that because of her, my livelihood will go to hell in a handbasket.”

“Do you think that?”

“Of course not,” Ty thundered, surprised his friend would even ask. Without her his life would be hell. It had only been five minutes and he was already feeling the fires beckoning from below. Charlotte was wrong.

Russell slapped his hand on the bar, breaking the silence. “Ty, are you going to sit in here pouting while she leaves?”

That brought Ty’s head up. Was he? Hell, no, he wasn’t.

Pushing the glass into Russell’s hand, Ty turned on his heel and stormed across the room. He was almost out of the door when Russell called out to him. “Where are you going?”

With his hand on the door, Ty looked over his shoulder at his friend and a devilish smile stretched across his face. If Charlotte thought he was going to lie down and take this,

she had another think coming, like the flat of his hand on her luscious ass. “To make that hardheaded woman listen to reason. Even if I have to lasso her ass to me to accomplish it.”

## Chapter Eight

Charlotte had gotten outside and down the front steps before she realized what a humongous mistake she was making. Why the hell was she allowing a small-minded man to determine the fate of her future? She was never one to let other people influence her decisions, so why was she listening to them now?

*Because you're afraid,* her mind chided.

Like she didn't know that. But now, instead of just being afraid of what the future would hold, she was afraid she had pushed Ty away. Setting her hastily packed bag on the front porch, Charlotte stared out into the vast green pastures she'd already begun to think of as home and wanted to cry anew.

Her heart was in the right place, but whether Ty would see that or not was a completely different story. She had done it all for his sake, for the ranch's sake, for everything but love's sake.

But she didn't want to lose him. Damn it all to hell.

"Fuck!" She yelled to the heavens, accidentally startling Ida who was walking up the steps.

"Wow. What did I miss?"

Embarrassed about her outburst, Charlotte flushed. "Sorry, I didn't see you there."

Ida merely smiled. "I've had days like those myself, honey. Don't even worry about it. Is the meeting over already?"

"Over, and then some." Sighing, Charlotte ran her hands through her short hair in frustration. What was she going to do? She'd reacted without thinking, and now everything was a giant mess.

Ida stepped up on the porch, her smile slowly sliding from her weathered face when she spied Charlotte's bag on the ground. "Is everything okay?"

There weren't enough words in the English language to explain the cluster-fuck that was her life. "Not by a long shot."

"What ..."

Charlotte walked away, not sure what else to say. She didn't mean to be rude, but short of saying *I'm a big stupid loser*, which left a lot to be desired, nothing came to mind.

Walking aimlessly around the grounds, Charlotte went over her options again. There were only two that truly seemed viable. She could either try to kiss and make up, or try to hide and lick her self-inflicted wounds. Although, knowing Ty, he wouldn't let her stay hidden for long.

Troubled, Charlotte headed inside the barn where she and Ty had made love not so long ago. It was one of her favorite places to visit on the ranch, so she wasn't too surprised it was where her aimless wandering had led her.

They'd come here many times over the last few weeks. Sometimes just to talk, others to visit whatever animal Ty was babying at the moment, but whenever they came, he would always tease her about taking her into the tack room. Sometimes he did. This was their place. A musty room filled with hay. It wasn't romantic, but it was theirs.

Charlotte walked to the stall and leaned on the wooden gate. Chiana was no longer standing in the stall. Instead a pretty ebony mare was in her place. Calling softly to the horse, Charlotte stuck her hand over the gate, running her hand down the horse's forehead softly.

Looking into the mare's deep, dark eyes, Charlotte made a decision. Well, not really a decision, since she'd known from the moment she stepped outside that she had made a mistake. More like a choice. A choice to grow up and to stop running away.

Ty was right. From the start, she'd run from him, using her fear as a shield. It was like Charlotte was waiting for him to make a mistake so she could say, "Ah-hah, I knew you weren't perfect." But he wasn't perfect, and Lord knew she wasn't. This morning was proof of that if nothing else was.

Perfect or not, she was his, just as much as he was hers. And Charlotte loved the stubborn fool too much to take one step off this land. Ty was stuck with her, whether it was good for him or not.

"You planning on stealing my horse and making a run for it?" Ty drawled coming up from behind her.

Not daring to breathe for fear of ruining the moment, Charlotte simply turned around to look at him, needing to reassure herself that it wasn't a dream. It wasn't. Ty was there. Letting out a deep breath, Charlotte smiled. Relief filled her soul and tears of joy filled her eyes. He was there. He'd come for her.

"You know what we do to horse thieves around these parts, don't you?" Ty cocked a brow, waiting for her to reply.

"Your horses are safe, cowboy." Charlotte matched his teasing tone with one of her own. She felt lighter, finally able to breathe. Everything was going to be okay. They were going to make it. They had love on their side, how could they not? "We never did get around to the riding lesson."

"There's time."



Smiling, Charlotte agreed, there was time.

She was still here. The residual anger that had been tearing at Ty's soul slowly began to fade away. Charlotte was there, and whatever demons she'd been fighting were conquered. He was still going to tan her hide, though, for putting them through that little drama, but afterwards they were going to make love. Slow, sweet, deep love.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to overlook my little outburst and blame it on ... I don't know ... that time of the month?" Charlotte took a step toward Ty, heart in her eyes, as Ty took a step toward her.

"We can if you're willing to overlook my choice in business partners and submit to a punishment worthy of your bratty behavior."

"Punishment, huh?" They were standing toe to toe, and as close to eye to eye as their height difference would permit. "Do you think I need to be punished more than I've already been?"

Ty wanted to burst out laughing. Did she need a punishment, was she kidding? Charlotte had almost killed him when he she said they were over. A spanking was the least she deserved. Of course, it wouldn't just be a spanking. It would lead to other things. Other *nice* things like toys, rope, and orgasms. She'd pay, all right, over and over until they both passed out from pleasure.

Just thinking of taking her over his lap made him hard. "Oh, yeah. You need to be punished."

A slow, sexy smile slid across her full lips. The same smile that had first caught his eyes. "It's like that, is it?"

"You almost walked away from me. If I don't set an example now, you're liable to try it again, and I'm not going through that hell twice."

“It wasn’t easy on my side, either,” she pouted, as if that was going to save her fine ass. It was a cute pout and all, but Ty was really getting into the spanking idea.

“Not my problem, darlin’.” Ty had run into Ida on his way to search for Charlotte and she’d warned him where Charlotte had been heading. Not before blistering his ears on how to treat a woman though. Like it was his fault Charlotte was as stubborn as she was beautiful.

Come to think of it, *that* should be an extra spanking right there, because he’d had to listen to Ida. Yeah, two spankings. Ty was getting into this punishment idea more and more.

“So what’s the plan?” Pressing her breasts into his chest, Charlotte tried to tempt him. Not that he needed any more temptation. But neither did she, if her hard nipples were anything to judge by. “Bend me over your knee until I beg you for forgiveness.”

“That’s just the beginning. After I tan this delectable ass of yours, I’m going to march you up to the house and call Judge Britton. Tell him he has a wedding to perform.”

Startled, Charlotte pulled back. “A wedding! So soon?”

Before all of this nonsense started, Ty had been willing to wait a decent interval, but now decency could be damned, for all he cared. He just wanted Charlotte. And he wanted her forever.

“I was going to take things slow, but you’ve pushed my hand. The only choice you now have is Christmas morning or Christmas evening.”

“I can’t plan a wedding that fast.”

Once again, she was talking like he cared. “You’d better.”

Shaking her head in amazement, Charlotte let out a light laugh. “You’re insane.”

Her laughter, soft and angelic, was like music for his soul. “I’m willing to take that into consideration, but that’s neither here nor there. Two choices, woman. Which will it be?”

“Christmas afternoon.”

Growling, Ty pulled her to him. She just had to have her way. Damn, he loved this woman. “That wasn’t one of your choices.”

"You're so bossy."

"And you love it." Leaning forward, Ty brushed a slow sweet kiss across her pouting lips. "You love me."

"Yes, I do." Sighing, Charlotte rested her head on his chest, holding onto to him with all of her might. "I guess I can plan a quick wedding. We can give this crazy marriage idea of yours a try."

Ty picked her up and carried her back to the tack room. The same room where they'd made love, not so long ago. Setting her down on a bale of hay, Ty stepped between her legs, pulling her close to him. He might have to save that spanking for later. Right now, he just wanted to be inside of her. "There is no try with us, Charlotte. It will work."

Raising a brow, she wrapped her hands in his shirt and pulled him forward until his mouth was just a breath away from her own. "That sure of yourself, cowboy?"

"No, darlin'. I'm just that sure of us."

\* \* \* \* \*

For a quickie wedding on a horse ranch in the middle of nowhere, Charlotte and Ty's celebration had been beautiful. Taking another sip of her cool champagne, Tamara watched the lovebirds dance on the makeshift dance floor, with tears of joy in her hazel-brown eyes.

Excited for her best friend, Tamara fought hard to hold back the mixed emotions threatening to bring her down. She was happy for them. So very happy, but at the same time she was sad for herself.

It was selfish and she knew it, but she was going to miss Charlotte. Sighing, Tamara walked toward the bar, intent on snagging something a bit stronger. Champagne was all well and good, but she needed a *drink* drink and something extremely fattening to eat, preferably covered in cheese.

After hijacking a startled waiter's tray, Tamara found a table far away from the skinny women, where she could eat in peace. There was no way she was going to go hungry on Christmas. She'd been good all year, and if Santa didn't count her vibrator, she'd been good for longer than she cared to remember.

"Is this seat taken?"

Startled, Tamara looked up with a mouth full of cheesy-stuffed-something-or-other and almost choked. Inhaling deeply, she reached for her glass. Did she look like she needed company?

"I've never had that reaction before."

Sitting down, the man leaned over and handed her a napkin. Now that her breathing was under control, Tamara's brain resumed its normal function, and she was able to breathe. Bad with names, Tamara thought long and hard on his. She knew he was the best man, but she couldn't remember his name.

She'd met him briefly, but hadn't given him more than a passing thought. He was white, wearing a cowboy hat, and she probably weighed more than he did. So, not her type.

"Sorry about that." She gestured to the tray. "I think that was God's way of telling me to back off the cheese do-dads."

"Or maybe he was just telling you to share." Eyeballing the platter, he rubbed his hands together avariciously. "I've been chasing that waiter down all night. Mind if I ..."

Well, she did, but Tamara was too polite to say so. "Help yourself."

Sighing, she watched as he did just that. Cute and he ate more than she did. That was just fucked up.

"I'm Russell Chrichton, by the way. We were introduced earlier, but I could tell by the vacant look you just gave me that you didn't have a clue."

"I remembered," Tamara lied. She knew it started with an R ... or a letter, or something.

"Right." He grinned, his green eyes twinkling. "So what's with you bogarting all the cheesy puffs, Tamara?"

"A girl's got to eat. And besides, I starved all day yesterday to look good in this hideous dress."

Chuckling Russell tilted his head to side, as if studying her. Something Tamara wished he wouldn't do. The dress wasn't all that bad, but it did show off a bit more of her curves than she would have liked.

"I think you look lovely."

Narrowing her eyes, Tamara snagged a cheese pastry and waved it at him. "Lookie here, cowboy, Charlotte has already warned me about y'all's slick ways. You just stay on that side of the table, and I'll stay on this side. I think Char and Ty have erased enough color lines for one small town."

Russell roared with laughter, turning several heads in their direction. After his laughter subsided to a mere chuckle, he replied, "You are hilarious."

With a mouth full of food, Tamara merely smiled. Making people laugh was her specialty.

"I'm not a *cowboy* cowboy," he continued, taking the black hat off and setting it down on the table next to his glass. "I just look damn good in the hat. And I don't live in Santa Estrella anymore. I have a law office in Los Angeles."

"I live in LA"

"Really?" Interest piqued, Russell went back to studying her. "What do you do?"

"Mainly look for jobs," Tamara admitted with a rueful smile. She had as much luck holding down a job as she had sticking to a diet. But that was life.

"Looking for a job right now?"

"I did say *mainly*, didn't I?" It wasn't a secret. Hell, she spent more time going over the newspaper than birds did. "But something will turn up. It always does."

“What do you do?”

Tamara paused for a moment to study him. She could make small talk with the best of them, but for some strange reason, he seemed genuinely interested. “I’m a photographer.”

“Really? How come they didn’t hire you to take pictures of the wedding?”

“Because Charlotte wanted to torture me by making me wear this dress instead.”

Russell chuckled softly as he downed another appetizer. “Have you ever done surveillance work before?”

“You mean, stalk people with my camera?”

“Sorta.”

“Do ex-boyfriends count?”

“Did you get away with it?” he countered amusedly.

“Of course.”

“Then it counts. I’m looking for someone to take a few pictures for me from time to time. Do you know anything about the law?”

Tamara shrugged her shoulders. This was the strangest job interview she’d ever been on. “Only enough to not break it.”

“That’s a start,” Russell laughed. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a wallet and handed her his business card. “Why don’t you call me when you get back home? I’m sure we can work something out.”

Glancing down at his card, Tamara wondered if he was serious. “You’re a very odd man. Tell me the truth. Was it the cheesy poofs?”

“No,” Russell said, shaking his head. “It was your smile. I’m a sucker for nice, full smiles. I think I might have a tooth fetish.”

“Well, if the price is right, you can stare at my teeth all day.” Tamara tucked the card in the neckline of her dress. It was worth looking into. What did she have to lose?

 THE END 

## **Lena Matthews**

Lena Matthews spends her days dreaming about handsome heroes and her nights with her own personal hero. Married to her college sweetheart, she is the proud mother of an extremely smart toddler, three evil dogs, and a mess of ants that she can't seem to get rid of.

When not writing she can be found reading, watching movies, lifting up the cushions on the couch to look for batteries for the remote control and plotting different ways to bring Buffy back on the air.

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