

Colters' Wife

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The following story contains explicit sexual content, adult language,
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Chapter One

Adam Colter fingered a strand of Holly's light brown hair as she lay sleeping. Her back was nestled into his chest, her behind cradled in his groin.

He allowed his hand to slide from her hair to her shoulder then down her side and over the swell of her belly. Underneath his fingers, the baby moved, and his chest tightened at the fierce satisfaction that gripped him.

She stirred restlessly, and he pulled his hand away, not wanting to disturb her sleep. She tired easily these days with the baby being due just a few short weeks from now.

With reluctance, he pressed a kiss to her head then carefully extricated himself from the bed. He dressed then went in search of his brothers.

He found Ethan and Ryan in the kitchen eating breakfast. They looked up as Adam entered, their gazes questioning.

"Holly still asleep?" Ethan asked.

Adam nodded. "She didn't even stir when I slipped out of bed."

"She's been awfully tired lately," Ryan spoke up, concern coloring his voice.

"I wanted to talk to you both while she's sleeping," Adam said as he took a seat at the bar next to his brothers.

Ethan's brow creased. "Is something wrong?"

"No. I just wondered if we shouldn't move Holly to Denver well before her due date. I was thinking two weeks at least. I don't like the idea of her going into labor early and getting stuck on the mountain."

"I think it's a good idea," Ryan said. "The idea of her going into labor here scares the shit out of me."

Ethan nodded his agreement. "If you want I can call and book a condo."

"Do that," Adam said. "I'll make arrangements with Riley to take care of the horses while we're gone."

A light shuffling sound had Adam and the others turning around. Holly stood in the doorway, her hair disheveled and dark circles under her eyes.

"Good morning," she murmured as she walked over.

She slid into Adam's arms and turned her face up for his kiss. He covered her mouth, enjoying the taste of her sweet lips.

After a moment, she eased from his arms and turned to Ryan. Ryan folded her in his arms and hugged her tight, his hand going down to tenderly cup her belly.

"Mornin'," he murmured as he gave her a gentle kiss.

She rested a moment in Ryan's arms before going to Ethan.

"How are you feeling, doll?" Ethan asked as he slid his arms around her.

"Tired," she admitted. "Little bit here has his days and nights mixed up I'm afraid."

"Kept you up huh," Ethan said sympathetically. "Sit down and I'll fix you something to eat."

She shook her head. "I'm not that hungry. Thought I'd get some juice and go sit on the front porch for a bit."

Adam exchanged worried glances with his brothers as she headed for the fridge to pour herself a glass of juice. She waddled back out of the kitchen, and a few seconds later, they heard the front door open then close.

"Book that condo," Adam said grimly. "We'll head out after her next check-up with the midwife."



Holly stepped out the front door and closed her eyes as the cool September breeze blew over her face. She dropped her free hand to her belly and massaged absently as she made her way to the big comfy chair the guys had gotten for her.

She sank into the plump cushion and sighed in relief as she propped her feet up on the ottoman. She'd only been on her feet a few minutes and already they were screaming in protest.

Whoever said pregnancy was all peaches and sunshine had clearly never experienced it.

She sipped at her juice and rubbed her hand over the swollen mound of her stomach. In response, the baby kicked and rolled, bringing a smile to Holly's face.

She hadn't exactly been truthful with the guys. Sure, the baby kept her up from time to time, but lately her sleep had been plagued by nightmares. Since returning to the men she loved more than anything, she'd been afraid that something would happen to separate them again.

There were nights when she woke, bathed in sweat, reaching out to make sure they were still there. Especially Ryan. No longer did he get up to return to his room. He seemed as anxious as she was to make sure nothing came between them again.

She touched him often, reassuring herself, combating the images of him being shot. Just as Adam and Ethan seemed to reach out for her, their fear of losing her just as prevalent.

They all fought their demons in different ways, and frankly, Holly was ready to move beyond the paralyzing fear. Ready to settle in with the men she loved and live their life together.

The door opened and she looked sideways to see Ethan eyeing her with concern. He walked over and settled into the wide chair next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

He leaned to kiss her temple, and she closed her eyes in pleasure.

"What's going on with you, doll?" he asked in a gentle voice.

He placed his free hand over her belly and stroked up and down in a comforting motion.

She sighed and leaned further into his embrace. He kissed the top of her head as it came to rest against his chest. He began rubbing her back, massaging and kneading the muscles.

A low moan of pleasure worked its way from her throat.

"Feel good?" he asked.

"Uh huh." Her tongue felt too thick to form words. Her eyes closed wearily against his chest as he continued his rub. The sleepless nights took over as Ethan worked magic with his hands. Her eyelashes fluttered and she struggled to try and stay awake.

Ethan looked down as Holly's eyes closed in her battle to stay awake. He continued stroking her back, enjoying the feel of her in his arms. He silently urged her to submit to the desire to sleep. God knew she needed it.

He hated that she still fought with the nightmares. Oh, she wouldn't ever admit to it, but he heard her quiet whimpers, felt her flinch and shake in her sleep. The others were just as aware.

They held her, making sure she was never alone during the night. When the nightmares began, they would hold her, comfort her, but they felt helpless as her terror continued.

He looked down again to see her face buried in his chest. Still, he waited, wanting to make sure he wouldn't wake her when he carried her inside.

He turned his head when he heard the front door open. He raised his finger to his lips when Ryan slipped outside. Ryan's eyes swept hungrily over Holly, worry darkening his blue eyes.

"I'm going to take her in," Ethan said quietly. "Open the door if you don't mind."

With great care, Ethan eased his arm from around Holly and stood up. Then he bent and curled his arms underneath her, lifting her up against his chest. He moved slowly to the door, stopping when she nuzzled her cheek further into his neck.

When she settled back down, he proceeded through the door that Ryan held open for him. He walked to the bedroom and eased her down on the bed. She made a sound of protest when he moved away from her. Taking only a second to shed his shoes, he crawled into bed with her and cuddled her close.

She let out a sweet sigh of contentment as she snuggled into his arms. He resumed rubbing her back as he had on the porch until she relaxed completely in his embrace. Soon her even breathing filtered through the room, and Ethan closed his eyes, content to lie there with the woman he loved filling his arms.



When Holly awoke, she first registered that Ethan was no longer in front of her. But she was cradled into a hard back and a hand rested possessively on her rounded abdomen. She smiled. Ryan.

She blinked the cloud of sleep from her eyes and marveled at how much better she felt. Part of it was the extra hours of sleep she'd needed but the other part was the reassurance she felt with Ryan curled around her body.

Wanting to face him, she struggled to turn over, a not so simple feat these days. Gentle hands assisted her and warm lips met hers as soon she eased around.

She sighed in utter contentment as Ryan deepened his kiss, his tongue brushing over hers. She slid her hand over his naked chest then

up to his shoulder where the puckered scar from his gunshot wound rested.

Unexpected tears swam in her vision as she once again relived the horror of that night. Damn pregnancy hormones. She was a walking basket case these days.

"You're not going to lose me," Ryan murmured as he pulled away from her mouth.

A tear trickled down her cheek. God, she needed this reassurance. Her heart seized every time she looked at him lately.

"I love you," she said, her voice whispery with emotion.

"I love you, too," he said gruffly.

The baby kicked and rolled between them and Ryan's face relaxed into a grin.

"Active today isn't he?"

He moved his hand into the waistband of her sweat pants and eased it downward until her belly was bared. His fingers smoothed reverently over the taut skin. Then he bent down to press his lips to the small bump just underneath her ribs.

"Is that his foot?" he asked.

Holly chuckled. "Could be. I can't ever keep up, he moves so quick."

He slid his hand up, pushing her shirt until he cupped one full breast. Then he bent again and kissed the swollen nipple.

"I've missed you," he said simply, and she knew he meant their lovemaking.

She moaned softly as he swirled a fingertip around the puckered tip, left damp from his tongue.

"I've missed you too," she murmured.

In reality, she was about to scream in frustration. They hadn't made love to her in weeks. She knew they were being considerate of her discomfort, but it was an unnecessary restraint of their part.

They'd been nothing but excruciatingly gentle since she'd returned to them, never taking her in the way they had before. They made love to her reverently, almost as if they were afraid they'd hurt her unintentionally.

Sure, not a day, hell an hour, went by that they didn't touch her, caress her, shower her with tenderness, but it wasn't the same as making love to her.

"I won't break," she said pointedly.

A ragged sigh of frustration broke from Ryan's chest.

"I don't want to hurt you or the baby. Adam, Ethan and I discussed this. We think it would be best to wait until after the baby's born."

A frown tugged on her eyebrows. She rose up on one elbow and glared down at Ryan.

"Let me get this straight. You and your brothers decided, on your own, without consulting me, that you would be abstaining until after our baby is born?"

He eyed her cautiously. "Uh yeah."

She pressed her lips into a tight line. "I see. And did it never occur to you that maybe I had no desire to abstain? Since when do you make my decisions for me?"

He looked at her in complete befuddlement, the look of a man who knew he was cornered and had no idea what to say to get out of it.

She almost grinned, but it would completely ruin the stern look she was trying to effect. Instead she leaned down and pressed her lips to his chest. She licked the lines between his hard muscles, dipping down to explore his rigid six pack.

His breath escaped in a long hiss. "Holly, I don't think...I don't think this is a good idea."

She raised her head to look him in the eye. "That's your problem. You're thinking way too much."

She slid off the bed taking only enough time to shimmy out of her clothes before she crawled back on top of him.

Her fingers dipped to the button of his jeans. "The way I see it, you have a couple of choices," she began. "One, you can take off your jeans like a good boy, or two, you can suffer the wrath of a hormone crazy pregnant woman."

"Well, when you put it that way."

His hands reached down to fumble with his jeans. They shook as he shoved the denim down his hips. A few seconds later, he was naked, his cock straining upward.

A surge of desire shot through her system, leaving her breathless. Not giving him any time to change his mind, she put her hands on his chest to brace herself then threw one leg over his hips.

His hands supported her shoulders as she reached down to position his cock at her pussy entrance. Then she sank down, sheathing him completely in one motion.

Ryan threw back his head, eyes shut tight as he clenched his teeth. She smiled. She might be a little rusty, but that wasn't exactly her fault

since they hadn't exactly been willing participants of late. But she was going to remedy that. Starting now.

His hands slid down her body, over the curves and swells until they settled on her hips. She began a slow, sensuous ride, determined to punish him for holding out on her. He'd be begging for mercy before she was finished.

She leaned forward, letting her hair fall over his chest as she continued to roll her hips. Aching, exquisite pleasure built in her pelvis, curling like fire in her abdomen. God, she'd missed him, too.

Her fingers curled into his chest. She panted as she felt the slow rise of her orgasm. No, she wouldn't end this so quickly. She sank down again and paused, enjoying the feel of him embedded so deeply inside her.

"Jesus, Holly, you can't stop now."

The low desperate sound of his voice sent a thrill through her chest. She stared into his eyes and grinned mischievously. She raised her hips one tiny inch before sliding back down.

"You're so taking advantage of the fact that I can't pay you back for this," Ryan grumbled.

His hands traveled around her hips to cup her ass. He arched into her, thrusting deeper into her.

She knew she wasn't going to last very long. And then he moved one of his hands between her legs. His fingers found her clit and began stroking the quivering flesh. She gave up on making him suffer and picked up her pace.

Her knees dug into his sides as her body tightened. Every muscle strained, reaching, begging for release. Her breath tore out of her lungs like fire.

Ryan surged upward and let out a cry as his warm seed flooded her. A few seconds later, her orgasm burst over her, releasing a thousand tiny bubbles, each one popping in a twinge of pleasure.

He caught her as she slumped forward. Gently, he eased her to his side, curling his arms around her as he held her close. They both heaved for breath as their hearts beat erratically in the aftermath.

He kissed her hair, stroking a hand down her back as she shuddered with aftershocks.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked against her ear.

She shook her head and nuzzled closer to him.

"Adam and Ethan are going to kick my ass over this," he said wryly.

She smiled and pulled away to look at him. "No, they won't. I don't plan on giving them the opportunity."

"Uh oh."

"Don't you worry about your brothers," she said. "I have plans for them."

Chapter Two

Holly didn't miss the suspicious stares of Adam and Ethan when she reappeared in the kitchen at lunchtime. The questioning glances turned to scowls when Ryan strode in behind her, a satisfied smile curving his lips.

They continued to frown at him for the entire meal until finally Ryan excused himself, mumbling something about checking the horses. Holly smiled to herself and looked down so the others wouldn't see her reaction.

"I'm going to go take a shower," Ethan muttered as he put away his plate.

Adam continued to pick at his food, staring over at Holly every once in awhile. She waited until Ethan had been gone for a few minutes before casually putting away her own plate.

She avoided Adam's stare and headed toward the bathroom.

The mirrors weren't fogged when she slipped in. The sound of the shower echoed in the large bathroom, and she could feel the chill from the spray clear across the room. She suppressed a chuckle. A cold shower wouldn't do him any good once he stepped out and found her naked and waiting.

She shimmied out of her clothing and tossed the pants and shirt aside. The water turned off then Ethan stepped out of the shower, reaching for a towel on the rack. He still hadn't seen her, and she capitalized on the surprise angle.

Noiselessly, she closed the distance between them and reached her hand out to caress his ass. He tensed as her arm snaked around his hips, dipping to his groin.

His cock swelled in her hand, and she smiled.

He groaned softly. "You're not playing fair, doll."

She pressed a kiss to the center of his back, nibbling a path up his spine. "Neither are you," she murmured.

He shuddered against her lips then turned around to face her, holding the towel over his groin. He cupped her face with one hand and bent to kiss her. She knew it for what it was. A brush off.

To hell with that.

She yanked the towel away and cupped his erection in her hands, boldly sliding her fingers over the length.

"I'll give you the same two choices I offered Ryan," she said, leveling a stern look at him. "You can give in like a good boy or suffer the wrath of a hormonal pregnant woman."

He sucked in his breath and held it then let it out with a curse. "I knew that asshole caved."

She grinned wickedly. "Just like you're going to."

He arched an eyebrow then his expression softened. "Doll, I don't want to hurt you or our baby. You're tired. Worn out. No way I'm placing more demands on you. I can wait."

She raised up on tip toe and kissed him. "But I can't," she whispered.

He stared down at her, indecision wrinkling his brow. Then she went for the kill.

"Please."

He closed his eyes, and she knew she'd won. Manipulative? Probably. But she wasn't going to waste time feeling guilty when the three of them were harboring misplaced fears about hurting her.

He pulled her into his arms, kissing her deeply. She moaned as she melted into his body. She needed this. Wanted it. Craved it.

"I'm not fucking you on the bathroom counter again," he muttered as he gently picked her up.

She giggled as he carried her into the bedroom.



Holly stepped outside the kitchen door and closed her eyes briefly as the breeze blew over her. She felt invigorated. The fatigue that had hung so heavy over her in the last weeks had dissipated and in its stead, a refreshed energy had taken hold. She felt lighter, freer, and she'd slept wonderfully the past two nights after she'd waylaid Ryan and Ethan.

Adam...well, he was another story. He'd avoided her for the last two days. If she wasn't so certain as to why, it would have hurt her feelings, but she knew why he was running. But he couldn't hide from her forever.

She found him in the barn mucking one of the stalls. She stood watching him, his shirt off, muscles bulging as he worked.

After a few moments, he turned around as if sensing her presence. Concern creased his brow and he walked over to where she stood.

"Baby, is everything okay?"

She smiled and nodded.

He frowned. "You shouldn't be out here. You should be inside resting."

There was more emphasis on the resting part. He was almost accusatory in his tone since he knew damn well she'd made love to Ryan and Ethan.

"I wanted some fresh air, and honestly, Adam, you worry way too much. I'm fine. I feel great."

He tugged her into his arms and held her there for a long moment. His heart beat against her cheek and she nuzzled further into his embrace.

She slid one hand down to cup the denim covered bulge between his legs. He backed away in a hurry, separating himself from her.

His green eyes flashed. "Just because you've got those two knuckleheads wrapped around your little finger doesn't mean you're going to get anywhere with me."

She arched an eyebrow. "Are you saying I don't have you wrapped around my finger?" she asked innocently.

He scowled at her. "You know damn well I'd give you the moon if you asked."

"Then make love to me," she said softly. "I don't want the moon. I want you."

He sighed and shook his head. "Baby, I can't. Don't ask me this. Please. I—I can't hold back. I'll hurt you and that would kill me. You know me. I'm rough. I'm demanding. It's better if we wait until after the baby's born."

"Bull shit."

His head reared in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Bull shit," she repeated. She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot in irritation. "That's such a load of BS and you know it."

You'd never hurt me. You've never once done anything I wasn't begging for."

He looked at her in open mouthed shock.

She turned abruptly with an aggravated huff and stomped out of the barn. Infuriating man. One would think she'd asked him to donate a kidney, though he probably would have agreed to that. But ask him for sex? And the world came crashing to an end. Weren't men supposed to live, breathe and dream about sex twenty four hours a day? Clearly no one had shared that little tidbit of information with Adam.



She was still in a fit of temper (and exasperation) thirty minutes later as she stomped around the kitchen, abusing the dishes. She still couldn't cook worth a darn, but at least she'd mastered the cleaning aspect.

She was attacking the sink with a brillo pad when warm arms wrapped around her and a mouth nuzzled her neck.

"Adam not cooperating with your mad seduction scheme?" Ryan murmured against her ear.

She sighed and leaned back into his arms. "He's a rigid, pain in my ass," she grumbled. "And as far as I'm concerned, he can sleep on the couch tonight."

Ryan chuckled and turned her around in his arms. "Cut him some slack. You know how he is when he gets an idea in his head."

"It's a stupid idea."

Ryan pulled her against him and rested his chin on her head. "He's not easy. He's never been easy. But this is as hard on him as it is on you. He's like a bear with a thorn in his paw."

Holly pulled away and stared up at Ryan. "But he doesn't have to be! That's what irritates me to no end. He's being all self-sacrificing and for what? He's not happy, I'm not happy."

"Would a foot rub make you happy?" he asked innocently.

She stopped her rant. "Foot rub?"

He grinned. "If you come in the living room, I'll give you the best foot massage you've ever had."

She grabbed his hand and tugged him across the kitchen. He followed along, laughing.

Chapter Three

He was being the worst sort of ass. Adam stood in the doorway of the living room staring at the rest of his family. A family that, for the most part, he'd avoided for the last three days.

Holly lay on the couch, her head in Ethan's lap and her legs stretched across Ryan. Ethan idly stroked his fingers through her hair as he watched the movie playing on the television. Ryan was rubbing Holly's feet, and she was sound asleep.

He missed touching her, feeling her in his arms. Whenever he was around her, his need was a tangible ache. He wanted to take her to bed and fuck her in a dozen different ways. And therein lay the problem.

Ethan looked up at him then, raising his eyebrow in silent question. Despite his urge to turn around and walk away from the tender scene in front of him, instead, he felt compelled to walk over.

He hadn't intended to hurt her. God knew he'd do anything not to hurt her, but his avoidance of her had done just that.

"Can you get up without waking her?" Adam whispered to Ethan.

Ethan smiled. "Right now a herd of elephants could run through and she wouldn't stir."

"I'd like some time alone with her," Adam said hesitantly.

The three didn't often make demands of her time. Part of making the relationship work was not harboring jealousy or making her choose between them. But every once in awhile, they did need time alone with her. It was a need they each recognized and respected.

"Sure," Ethan said softly. He gently extricated himself from the couch, easing her head off his lap and onto the cushion. Ryan followed suit, and they both left the room.

Adam stared down at her for a long moment before finally sliding onto the couch next to her. When he lifted her head, she stirred and snuggled closer to him.

He ran his hand down the length of her body, enjoying the feel of her softness, her curves, the swollen mound of her belly. He couldn't wait to meet their child. At long last their family would be complete.

She stirred against him, and her eyes fluttered open. She blinked then smiled, her eyes going soft with love. That look never ceased to knock the breath right out of him. Her love was the greatest gift he'd ever received, and it wasn't one he had any intention of fucking up.

"I've missed you," she whispered.

He bent and kissed her forehead as his fingers trailed over her cheek. "I was an ass. I'm sorry."

She raised her head so that her lips met his. "I love you. You're not an ass."

"Could we go to bed? Just you and I tonight? I want to hold you and our baby," he said.

Her eyes glowed and she nodded. "I'd like that."

He helped her sit up, and she threw her legs over the couch as he stood up. He reached down to pull her up beside him then he scooped her into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

Her hands curled trustingly around his neck. The baby kicked and rolled against his chest, and his grip tightened around her as a surge of emotion swept through him.

Careful not to jostle her, he set her down on the bed. He reached for the covers and pulled them down, working them around her body. When he was finished, he crawled in beside her and pulled the comforter back over them.

He pulled her close to him, enjoying the feel of her soft skin against his.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, baby," he murmured. "I don't want you to think the wrong thing about why I wouldn't make love to you."

She grimaced and then her lips turned up into a rueful smile.

"You're way too over protective, but I love you dearly," she said. "And I understand why. I don't agree, but I'm not taking it personally."

"Good. Because, baby, if I wanted you any more, I'd spontaneously combust. But if I hurt you... I'd never forgive myself."

She smoothed her hand across his cheek and cupped his jaw in her palm. "Stop torturing yourself. Just hold me. I need you so much."

His heart turned over, and he felt such a strong rush of love at her words. "I need you, too, baby. You'll never know just how much. I'd do anything for you. I hope you know that."

She rose up to kiss him. "If I promise not to try and rape you anymore, would you stop avoiding me?"

He burst out laughing. He held her close, his chest shaking them both as he chuckled. "I'll make you a deal. Just as soon as you have our baby and have sufficient time to heal, I'll let you rape me all you want."

Chapter Four

Holly moved around the kitchen humming softly to herself. As she put the last of the dishes away, she checked her watch. The guys were out exercising the horses and would be gone for a little while yet.

She felt up for some fresh air and a short walk. Her back had been nagging at her all morning, and maybe if she could get out and stretch, she'd feel better.

She exited the house and set out on the path beyond the barn. She loved exploring the land surrounding their cabin. There was always a spectacular view to be had, no matter which direction she went.

Today, she circled behind the barn and headed into the trees up a gentle incline. She knew once she reached the top of the slope, she'd be able to look out over a small valley and the river that cut through it.

She paused at varying intervals as the stitch in her side increased in intensity. God, she'd become such a wimp since becoming pregnant. She leaned against a tree for support as she heaved for breath.

She looked up and gauged the remaining distance. Not too far and then she'd sit on her favorite rock and enjoy the view.

When she reached the top, she paused a moment, putting a hand to her back while she stared down at the running river. She turned her head to locate the bolder she usually sat on when a cramp rippled through her abdomen, knocking her off balance.

She panicked as her foot slipped over the edge. She waved precariously, fighting for balance. For a moment, she seemed suspended in mid air. Then she fell backwards.

Her fingers grasped at the ground, knocking against rocks and roots and she landed with a thud and slid rapidly down the incline toward the river below.

A jolt of pain shot up her leg when her foot caught between two rocks and her ankle twisted. But it stopped her downward progress and she came to a jarring halt.

When she was sure she wouldn't plunge down any further, she curled her arms around her belly, feeling for the baby's movements. Mentally, she took stock of where she hurt.

Her ankle throbbed, and she looked down to see her foot still solidly stuck between two large rocks. When she tried to reach down with her hand to shove at the stones, her shoulder protested vehemently.

Damn it.

She was okay. She was reasonably sure nothing was broken. Her shoulder hurt like the devil, probably just pulled, and her ankle had received a good wrenching. If she could just wrest her foot free, she could crawl back up the incline.

Another tremor began low in her back and spread around to the front of belly, tightening uncomfortably. She rubbed with her free hand and tried to keep her right shoulder motionless.

Well, this was a fine mess. But she knew she didn't have to worry. She might have to hang out here for a bit, but she knew they guys would find her. They'd return from riding and probably freak when they couldn't find her.

A twinge of guilt nagged at her. She shouldn't have gone walking until they returned, but she hadn't imagined falling, not when she'd walked this path so many times before without incident.

They'd be worried until they found her, but find her they would. Of that she was confident. Until then, she'd just have to lie back and try to relax. Maybe even take a little nap to get her mind off her aching back and her throbbing ankle.

Her abdomen tightened again and she soothed her hand over her belly, trying to work away the discomfort. She laid her head back, trying to get comfortable. Then she closed her eyes and willed herself to be patient and relax.



Holly opened her eyes and blinked rapidly, trying to make sense of her surroundings. She shivered as the cool evening air blew over her skin.

Raw, aching pain centered in her stomach and gathered in her groin. Her back felt as though someone was stabbing a fire poker in it.

She shifted, trying to sit up but quickly fell back when her body protested.

The sun had sunk in the sky and dusk wasn't far off. For the first time, fear prickled down her spine. Why hadn't they found her yet? She had no desire to be here after dark. Damn it, she wanted to go home and spend the night in the arms of the men she loved.

A sound had her turning her head upward. She strained to hear. Had she heard her name?

The harsh shout grew closer.

She struggled to try and free her foot to no avail. Knowing she had no choice but to hope they would hear her, she threw back her head and yelled as loud as she could.

A few seconds later, dirt and rock rained down over her head.

"Holly?" Ryan's frantic voice reached down to her.

"Ryan! I'm down here!" she shouted hoarsely.

A few seconds later, Ryan slid down the incline. Before she could utter a sound, he pulled her into his arms.

"Oh my God, Holly, are you all right? What happened?" he demanded as he pulled away.

His hands shook as he stroked over her body, touching her, reassuring himself that she was okay. He reached down and fumbled with the radio clipped to his hip.

"Adam, Ethan, I've found her. She fell down the incline behind the barn. Up where she likes to sit."

He tossed the radio to the side even as the others responded that they were on their way.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously. "What happened?"

"My foot is caught," she said. "I twisted my ankle. I couldn't get it free. And I think I pulled my shoulder out, but I can move it so I don't think it's bad."

Ryan bent over her trapped foot and gently pried it loose. He ran his fingers over the tender areas. "I don't think it's broken," he said, relief evident in his voice. "It's swollen, but it looks to just be a sprain."

Her breath caught as her belly tightened again, this time much more painful than before. "Oh!"

Ryan's gaze yanked to her, worry creasing his brow. "What's wrong?"

A sudden gush of wetness surged between her legs. Followed by yet another spasm low in her belly. Oh God, she was so stupid. She was in labor. Wasn't it supposed to have hurt more than this? All she'd felt was

a mild discomfort. Minor tightening, but the problem was she'd been feeling it all day. Had she been in labor that long?

"Ryan, I think my water just broke." She tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice but knew she failed miserably. "And it hurts. I think I'm in labor."

Ryan paled. "How long?"

"All day I think."

He cursed long and hard. "Why didn't you say anything?" he demanded. "Why did you come out here?"

Tears filled her eyes as another contraction left her breathless. "I didn't know," she gasped out as a tear spilled over onto her cheek. "I didn't realize. I'm sorry."

He gathered her in his arms and rocked back and forth. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I was just so scared. God, we couldn't find you anywhere. I was so afraid of losing you." He raised his head and looked around. "God damn it, where are they?"

She stiffened in his arms again and moaned softly as another contraction struck.

Ryan's hand shook as he checked his watch. "That wasn't even two minutes from the last."

"Ryan!"

Holly and Ryan both looked upward as Adam shouted down to them.

"Down here! I'll need help getting her back up," Ryan called up. He looked down at Holly and squeezed her hand. "Don't worry, love. We'll take care of you."

She squeezed back. "I know you will."

Adam slid down a few seconds later and knelt beside Holly, deep concern etched in his face. "Are you okay, baby?"

She nodded.

"She's in labor, Adam."

Adam jerked around to Ryan. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Holly said dryly.

"Fuck," Adam swore. "We've got to get her the hell out of her and down the mountain."

She raised a hand and gently cupped his cheek. "There isn't time."

"What do you mean there isn't time?" Adam demanded.

"Her contractions are too close together," Ryan said grimly. "I think she's close."

Adam's face drained of color and panic flared in his eyes. Ethan shouted from the top, and Adam yanked his head upward.

"Don't come down," he hollered. "We're bringing her up."

Adam bent down and gently scooped Holly up in his arms. He nodded toward Ryan. "Climb up, we'll have to relay her up. I don't want to take a chance on falling with her."

Ryan scrambled up the slope, stopping several feet up. He dug his feet into the soil and reached down for Holly. Adam carefully moved upward until he reached Ryan. Then he eased Holly into his brother's arms before scrambling ahead of him.

When they reached the top, Ethan reached down for her, hugging her tightly against his chest. His breaths came ragged and his heart pounded against her cheek.

"Thank God, you're all right," Ethan whispered as he kissed her forehead.

"She's in labor," Adam said shortly as he and Ryan climbed up beside Ethan.

Ethan's grip tightened around her. "Go get her things. I'll take her to the Rover."

"There's no time."

"What do you mean there's no time?" Ethan demanded.

"It'll have to be here," Adam said quietly. "Her contractions are coming too close. We don't have time to get her into town."

Holly moaned as another contraction, this one much stronger than the last ripped across her belly.

Ethan swore and took off across the ground at a fast pace. Adam and Ryan hurried ahead toward the cabin.

"Ethan, I'm okay," she gasped out. "You don't need to worry."

He pressed another kiss to her forehead as they neared the cabin. "I'll always worry about you, doll."

When they entered the house, Adam and Ryan rushed into the bedroom. "Put her here," Adam directed, motioning toward the bed. "We need to assess the situation. Ryan, you get on the phone and see if we can't get the midwife up here pronto."

Ethan set her down on the bed as another contraction gripped her. She closed her eyes, clenching her teeth. For something that hadn't been painful throughout the day, it sure was making up for lost time now.

Adam smoothed worried hands over her face, pushing her disheveled hair from her eyes. "I'm going to strip you down, baby. I need to see what's going on."

She nodded and sucked in another breath as another pain followed closely on the heels of the last.

Adam peeled away her clothing, taking care with her injuries. Ethan hovered by the bed, his face a study in panic.

"Oh God, Adam, I feel like I need to push!"

Adam tossed her pants aside and took stock of the wide panicked eyes that stared up at him. His own gut was clenched with so much anxiety he couldn't even think straight. But he knew he had to be calm for Holly and try to make her as much at ease as possible.

"Listen to me, baby. I need you to try and calm down and breathe deep. Don't push yet if you can keep from it."

Ryan strode back in. "She's on her way, but it's going to be awhile."

"We don't have awhile," Adam muttered.

"What are we going to do?" Ethan asked as he walked over to join his brothers. "I don't have a clue about delivering babies!"

Adam shrugged, working to keep the clawing panic from his voice. "We've delivered foals. It can't be that different."

Holly raised her head from the bed and leveled a disgruntled look at him. "You did *not* just compare me to a horse."

He grinned, feeling the tightness recede from his chest just a bit. They could do this. They would do this. Holly was depending on them.

"Ryan, you go get behind her and do your best to keep her calm," he said in a low voice. "Ethan you and I need to wash up then you have to find me some supplies. I need something to clamp the umbilical cord, and I need one of those bulb syringes we have in the medical box outside. Get whatever else you think we need because I can't think straight to save my life. And hurry the hell up."

Chapter Five

Ryan sat behind Holly, his arms around her, hands resting on her belly. She leaned back into his chest, her back cradled in his pelvis. He moved one hand up to push her hair from her face as another contraction seized her body.

She trembled in his arms, and it was all he could do not allow his fear to override all else.

When he'd returned to the house after exercising the horses, he hadn't been able to find her anywhere. In that moment, a whole host of terrifying scenarios ran through his mind. Crazy, insane ideas, but they'd scared him nonetheless.

Her ex husband had escaped from jail. Or maybe he'd hired someone else to kill her.

It brought back the memories of the night he'd lain helpless on the floor while Holly had been taken from him. His inability to save her, the fact that he'd failed her when she needed him most.

He closed his eyes and buried his lips in her hair. The sting of tears burned his eyelids, and he took deep steadying breaths to try and remain in control of his emotions. He wouldn't fall apart. Not now. Not when she needed him to be strong. He wouldn't fail her again.

"Breathe, baby. Deep breaths. That's it," Adam encouraged.

Adam was positioned between her legs while Ethan hovered over his shoulder.

"Oh God, it hurts!" she cried.

Her back arched and Ryan could feel the tension in her body, like a rubber band at full stretch.

"You're crowning, baby. We're almost there. Close your mouth. Breathe in through your nose then hold it and push. One long push. Let's see our baby."

At Adam's calm direction, she quieted. Ryan could feel her suck in a deep breath and then she bore down.

"That's it, love," Ryan whispered in her ear.

Ryan's hands cupped her belly, trying to infuse his strength into her.

"That's it!" Adam said in an excited voice. "Come on, baby, one more good push. You can do it."

An agonized rasp tore from Holly's throat and Ryan hurt for her. He ached. Felt her effort. Lived it with her. God, he wished he could take her pain. He'd do anything for her not to suffer like this.

"Aaaaah!"

"Okay, rest a minute," Adam urged. "The head is out. That's the hard part. Let me suction and then we'll work on getting our baby the rest of the way here."

Ryan looked down to see a wide grin splitting his older brother's face. Behind him, Ethan stood, his face alight with amazement, with awe.

"I need to push again, Adam."

There was panic in her voice as if she wasn't quite sure what she should be doing. Ryan kissed her hair and rubbed her belly with his hands, wanting to do something to offer her comfort.

Adam reached up and squeezed one of her hands. "Go on and push, baby. One more good push and we'll be done."

Holly's back arched once more and every muscle in her body tensed. Then she relaxed, much like a wilted balloon. She fell back into his arms, like a limp noodle. She breathed raggedly, her chest rising and falling with exertion.

Ryan looked down once more and met his brother's eyes.

"It's a boy," Adam whispered. "We have a son!"

A tear rolled down Ryan's cheek and he hastened to shrug it away with his shoulder.

Ethan crowded in and Adam held the squirming, slippery bundle up for Ethan to take.

"Can you take care of the cord?" Adam asked. "I'll need to make sure she delivers the placenta."

Ethan reached reverently for the wailing baby, tears glittering in his eyes as well. The three brothers exchanged glances, their eyes full of emotion. Ryan squeezed her in his arms, the rush of love he felt for her so strong it was all he could do to contain himself.

Ethan cut and tied off the cord then wrapped a blanket around the baby. He walked over and gently lowered the bundle into Holly's outstretched arms.

Ryan got his first glimpse of his son. Holly cradled him in her arms, her fingers lightly exploring his tiny face and fingers.

"He's beautiful," she whispered, her voice heavy with emotion.

Ryan sat there, holding them both in his arms. He held everything that mattered right there, close to him, against his heart. Another tear rolled down his cheek and this time he didn't wipe it away.

"I love you," he choked out against her hair.

Ethan bent in close to kiss Holly's temple then he lowered his face to kiss the baby's brow. "Thank you," Ethan whispered. "He's absolutely beautiful."

Holly turned her face up to beam at both him and Ethan. "Isn't he though?"

She turned the baby into her breast, offering him her nipple. After a few moments of the baby nuzzling and rooting, Holly managed to get him latched on. Soon he was contentedly feeding.

Footsteps sounding in the hall and a second later the midwife bustled in. She took in the scene then beamed over at Holly. "Well, I'd say you all did just fine without me."

She hustled over and took control of the situation. She shooed the men away, giving them each a different task, assuring them they could come back just as soon as she'd had a chance to get mother and baby cleaned up and checked over.

Chapter Six

Holly lay in a clean bed, a clean gown on and her baby in her arms. The midwife had fussed over her, gotten her and the baby cleaned up and checked over before the midwife beamed at her and declared her and the baby just fine.

She felt tired. Exhausted really. The midwife had wrapped her ankle and cautioned her to stay off of it for a several days. Not that Holly planned on getting out of bed anytime soon. She might just sleep for a week.

But she'd never been happier than at this moment.

The midwife bustled out, saying she'd be out to check on her and the baby the next day. Immediately afterwards, the guys filed in all headed to where Holly lay.

They crowded around, easing on to the bed with her but being careful not to jostle her.

They stared in awe at the baby, each taking turns touching his cheek or his tiny fingers.

"He's beautiful," Ethan whispered reverently.

Ryan curled an arm around her shoulders and hugged her to him. "Are you all right? How are you feeling?"

"Yes, baby, how are you feeling?" Adam asked, concern darkening his eyes.

Her chest clenched. Tears swam in her eyes as she surveyed the scene before her. "I'm fine," she choked out. "I've never been better." And it was the truth. How did life possibly get better than at this moment? It would never be as perfect again.

This picture would be forever locked in her memory. As frightened as she'd been, now that it was over, she couldn't imagine a better delivery.

No sterile hospital environment. No strangers bringing her son into the world. Just the men she loved more than life. Just the way it should be.

She looked up at Ryan who was still studying the baby with an expression akin to rapture. "Do you want to hold him? You're the only one who hasn't yet."

"I'd love it," he said huskily.

She lifted the bundle up and Ryan eased his large hands around the tiny baby. He cradled him to his chest and watched in fascination as his son opened his eyes.

"What are we going to name him?" Ethan spoke up.

"Seth," Holly replied. "I like the name Seth."

"Seth Colter. It's a fine name," Adam said, his eyes softening when they met Holly's. "Thank you."

She cocked her head, smiling up at him. "For what?"

"For our son. For loving us. For understanding us," he returned.

Her throat tightened and for a moment she couldn't have spoken if she wanted. She struggled to process the surge of emotion that built and swelled within her. Suddenly it was too much and not enough all at the same time.

She was safe. She was loved. She loved with all her heart. She was home.

The End

Maya Banks

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Understood
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When she breaks free from the bondage of her past, he'll be waiting.

Understood

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Jake Turner committed the ultimate mistake of falling in love with his best friend's wife. The distance he puts between them costs both him and Ellie Matthews dearly. Jake will never forgive himself for not seeing what a bastard his friend was. Now that Ellie is free from her nightmare, Jake waits, needing and wanting. He'll be there when Ellie is ready to spread her wings.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Understood*.

It was the last place Jake had thought to look, but in retrospect, he supposed it made the most sense. It was where it had all started.

He looked up into the bleachers of the high school football stadium to where Ellie sat staring out over the field. Where she'd watched him and Ray play as teenagers.

She hadn't seen him yet. Her attention was focused on some distant object, or maybe she wasn't seeing anything at all.

He started up the steps. When he reached the bleacher she was sitting on, he sat down beside her. He reached over to take her hand but didn't speak. He wasn't sure what to say anyway.

Tiny quakes emanated from her. Her hand trembled in his. A ragged sigh tore from her lips. It was a sound that ripped his heart right open. He knew she was battling to keep it together.

"Why?" she whispered. "*Why?*"

She broke off and turned her head away from him. But not before he saw her tears.

"I've never understood why," she said brokenly. "I was faithful. I loved him. I supported him. Why did he despise me so much? Why now, when he's been out of my life for two years, does he feel the need to destroy me?"

Jake wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close to him. He cupped her cheek in his hand and bent to kiss the top of her head.

"He's a bastard, Ellie. You're better than him. You've always been better, and he knows that. It eats at him. The only way he can feel better about the things he's done is by tearing you down."

Her body shook with her muffled sobs. Jake held on to her, not knowing what he could say or do to ease her pain. This helplessness scared him. He could feel her slipping away, back to the shell of a woman who'd barely existed after the divorce. He wouldn't lose her to that woman.

Ellie buried her head in Jake's chest, trying to absorb his strength and warmth. Maybe if she infused herself with enough of his steel, she wouldn't hurt so bad.

"What am I going to do, Jake?"

He stroked his hand through her hair, gently sorting through the strands with his fingers.

"You're going to hold your head high. That's what you're going to do."

"Everyone in the world thinks I'm the reason for our divorce now," she said bitterly. "They think I slept around on the Golden Boy and broke his heart."

Jake pulled her away until he looked her in the eye. He cupped her chin in his hand then bent to kiss her lips. She closed her eyes as yet more tears escaped.

"It doesn't matter what they think," he said as he continued to rub his thumb over her cheek bone.

"The divorce was humiliating enough," she whispered. "And now this. At least before all they had was conjecture on their part. Now, they have Mr. Perfect, Mr. All American, crying into a camera saying how horrible his wife was. If they didn't hate me before, they'll hate me now."

"Is it important that they love you, Ellie?"

She flinched. "No. It's not important. The only person I want to love me..." She broke off in horror at what she'd nearly admitted.

"Is who?" he prompted.

She shook her head, refusing to answer his question.

"Maybe I'm not that person, Ellie, but *I* love you. I've always loved you."

Her gaze flew back to his face. Her eyes widened at his statement. "*Always?*"

"Always," he said softly.

Colters' Wife