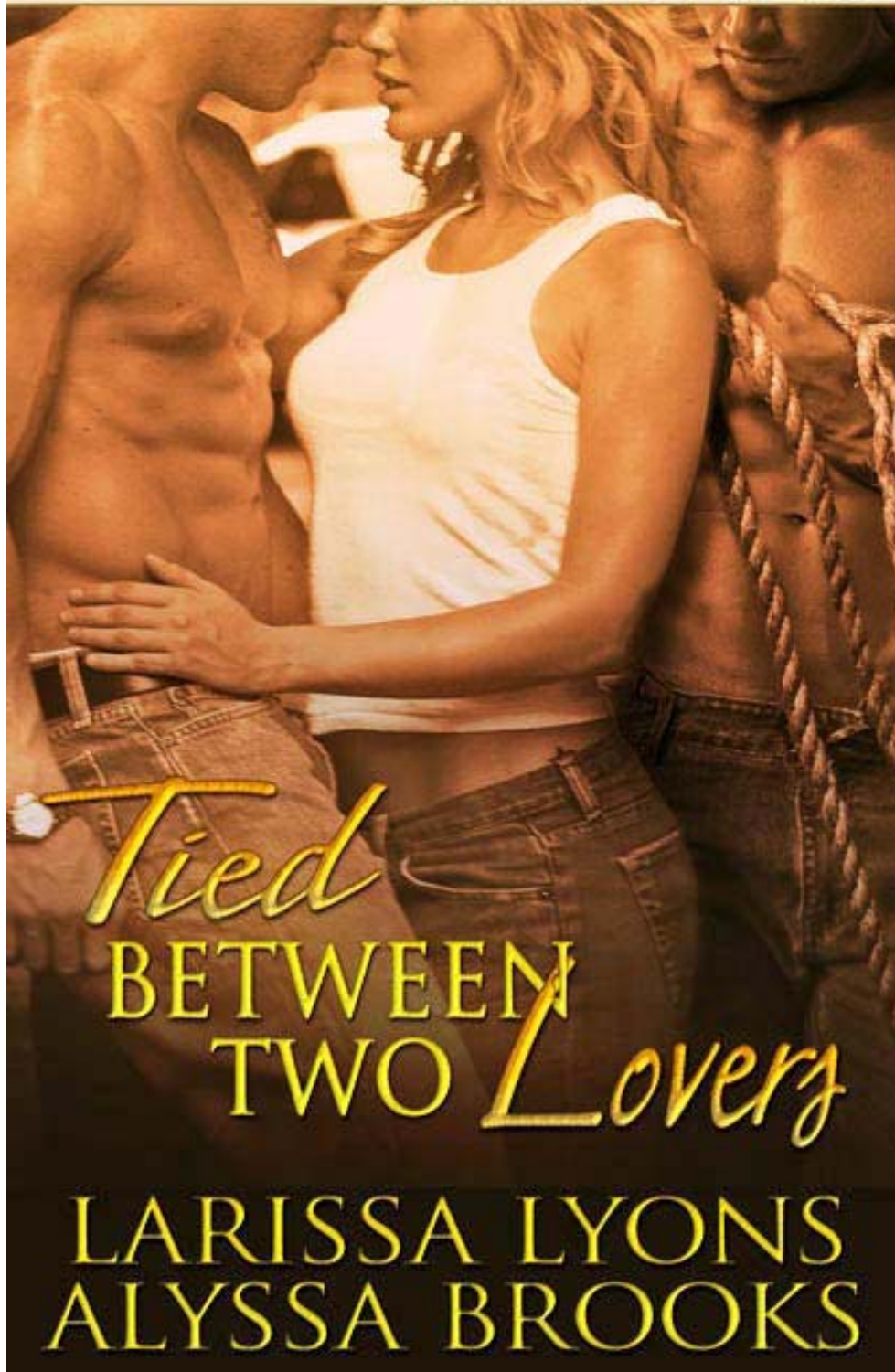


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Tied Between Two Lovers

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# ***TIED BETWEEN TWO LOVERS***

**Larissa Lyons & Alyssa Brooks**

### *Dedication*

To Mr. Lyons—for all of your help on astronomy, classic rock and how men think, but most of all, we dedicate *Tied Between Two Lovers*—the longest book we hope to ever write—to you for your unending support that allows Larissa to pursue her dream and spend hours on the phone with Alyssa when she should be cooking or cleaning or emptying the litter box.

>^..^< Larissa & Alyssa

### *Acknowledgements*

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MLS: Multiple Listing Services  
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Super Bowl: National Football League  
*The Twilight Zone*: CBS Inc.  
TiVo: TiVo, Inc.  
Washington Redskins: Pro-Football Inc.

## Prologue

*Ten Years Ago*

*Junior English Class – Assignment I*

Juliana could just imagine how her friends would stand up and read their papers in front of Sister Catherine when school started next week.

*My family went to Rome and visited the Sistine Chapel...*

*We spent all summer at our beach house. Our dad taught us how to surf...*

Then it would be her turn.

*How I Spent My Summer* by Juliana Reed.

*Like sand through the hourglass, these are the boring days of my life...*

If only something half as interesting as a soap opera script would happen to her. As if.

*I spent the summer watching TV – we have like seven of them scattered throughout the mansion. Whenever my parents went out of town, I became a pro at sneaking wine. Only a couple tablespoons at a time because the expensive stuff they buy tastes like shit.*

Oops! Can't say shit in front of a nun.

*Tastes like excrement, if you ask me, but how else is a bored-out-of-her-mind teenager locked away like lonely Rapunzel in the tower supposed to amuse herself?*

Oh right. *My hot, meant-for-surfing-in-the-ocean afternoons were passed in the bathtub daydreaming. About men.*

Yeah. As if any of that would fly with Sister Catherine. The nun would blow a gasket and Juliana would wind up grounded – again.

But why – just once – couldn't anything worth writing about happen in her life?

And why...why couldn't she relax, escape into her fantasy about Keanu Reeves and forget real life?

Because her tedious existence totally sucked.

"Stupid parents!" Feeling rebellious, Juliana cursed the water that splashed over the tub's edge as she violently ascended from its deep depths to claim the long-stemmed glass sitting on the ledge. Taking a tiny sip of the palest – she hoped sweetest – wine in the cabinet, she leaned her head against the blow-up tub pillow and allowed the knowledge that her parents didn't have a clue to warm her. Took another big drink just because she could and immediately grimaced.

*Okay...smaller sips prevail.* Blinking her watering eyes, she replaced the glass and tuned out the elevated television blaring from the corner. Time to refocus on her fantasy at hand. Time to relax.

School and English could wait, enjoying the remaining days of summer could not.

She might be stuck in the tub, but mentally Juliana was lying out on the beach working on her tan. If only someone would rub oil on her back...

Oh wait! But there he was...Keanu. Her boyfriend.

He...he...what? What did he do next?

Darn it! That's where her daydream screeched to a grinding halt once again and for no particular reason.

Something was missing. What could it be? Everything was the same as the last time she'd indulged.

In the bathtub. Check.

Strawberry bubble bath. Check.

A fancy fluted glass of wine from a cool bottle—this one had a gecko on it. Check.

Thoughts of Keanu Reeves' smoldering eyes running through her mind. Check. Check. Check!

So why was she still worrying about school and not dreaming of his lips locking with hers?

Maybe thinking about Sister Catherine's guaranteed essay assignment and knowing that other girls would write about their exciting adventures, things like international shopping *and* meeting cute boys—real ones—had messed with her brain.

The price she paid for having overprotective parents. Unlike most of her classmates at St. Mary's Prep, her parents' wealth didn't distract them from their only daughter. In fact, the only time they didn't keep tabs on her was whenever they weren't home. Juliana was their world, and the older she became, the more she resented their constant attention. It had gone way beyond annoying. Sometimes she wished they were dead, vanished off the face of the earth so—

Juliana mentally slapped herself. She'd never make out with Keanu if she kept thinking of her mom and dad.

The television overlooking the bathtub droned on, that sexy anchorman all the girls thought was so hot—the one with the righteous dimples—interviewing Brooke Shields. Juliana closed her eyes and tuned out the entertainment program and decided to replace Keanu with the anchorman.

"I've never seen a girl look so gorgeous in a bathing suit," he was telling her as he straddled her back, popping the lid to the oil. He squeezed some out...then some more...then...*psffffffh*hhh!

The whole bottle! Entirely too much!

"Stop! What are you doing?"

Oily back and all, Juliana tossed over into the sand. And lost yet another dream lover.

Why hadn't she thought to light some candles?

As if that would help. This was useless. She could hardly even seem to catch a buzz. What a waste of a perfectly good unsupervised evening.

With her parents gone, she'd no business in the tub! Why squander her time *alone*? They'd left earlier, flying to some political shindig in New York. She'd been invited to spend the night with Teresa and Veronica at their beach house, but her parents said she had to stay home and study. *Study*? It was summer! But evidently, a C minus in English wasn't acceptable for the governor's daughter.

Maybe she'd sneak out later—call a cab to pick her up at the end of the street and go to the beach house anyway.

At least with her parents gone, Juliana had the entire place to herself. Well, not quite, not if she counted the housekeeper, two maids, the butler and the guy who worked the grounds. Her mother loved how he grew roses and—

Juliana gritted her teeth. She *had* to stop thinking about her parents. She had to stop thinking *period*. She bet Hefner's latest blonde bimbo never had this much trouble imagining herself with hot Hollywood hunks. Great. Now she was thinking of old geezers.

Angling her foot, she turned the faucet on, trickling warmer water into the tub, and retrieved the floating bubble-covered washcloth. She rubbed it up and down her arms.

All she needed was another star for her fantasy...someone worthy.

Thoughts of her father's security team—specifically the hunk assigned to watch over her last year—flitted thought Juliana's mind. Rio Tarin. Now *he* would do nicely. The refined, dark-skinned Latino was the sexiest man she'd ever seen, even counting rich and famous movie stars.

Something deep within her tingled at the thought of him. Her stomach somersaulted, her skin goose bumping.

Now Rio was on the beach in her mind, running toward her—shirtless—completely prepared to rescue her from the oil-pouring idiot. Juliana relaxed into the tub all over again. Ahhh...

That was it. *Rio had been missing.*

She thought about him sweeping her slick body into his arms. They'd tumble to the ground together, roll in the sand, her toes rubbing against his hairy legs. They had to be hairy—this was her fantasy and he was a manly man.

His muscular body would be so hard as it covered hers and his mouth—

A rapid knock sounded on the door. "Mees Juliana?"

It was the upstairs maid. Darn it, she was just about to be kissed! By Rio!

"Mees Juliana?"

Being rich was a bitch.

"Go 'way!" Juliana grappled for the remote control, sending the volume higher, hoping to block out the knocks. She bet the average teenager didn't have this much



trouble catching a few minutes alone with their imaginary beaus – and other girls were allowed to date. Actual boys, not imaginary ones! Men, even!

But she did have Rio, and next year, she'd be eighteen. She could date him if she wanted to. It wouldn't matter what her parents thought.

Juliana wanted more than the secret looks shared between the two of them. The smiles and lighthearted jokes, the longing glances. At least on her part...his too if she wasn't mistaken.

Sensations zoomed through her at the prospect of being with Rio, kissed by Rio for real. A rapid round of knocking threatened to intrude.

"I'm busy!" And she promptly dove back into her fantasy, sinking beneath the bath water in the hope she could ignore the maid's banging long enough that the woman went away, leaving Juliana and Rio to share their smooch. Underwater.

No such luck. Despite the thick layer of bubbles, she still heard the insistent pounding.

Out of breath, she turned over, her lungs heaving as she rested her head on the back of the tub. Reality smacked her in the face...the running water, the blaring television, the maid banging on the door. *Still*.

"Mees Juliana! You mus' unlock thees minute!"

Wait a sec. Something was wrong.

Blinking, Juliana scrambled to sit up. The wineglass crashed to the floor. Paying no mind to the shards she'd have to clean up later, she focused on the TV.

"Mees Juliana!"

No longer airing the entertainment program, the screen now displayed breaking news of a plane crash. "Details are still coming in," the newscaster reported in a hyped tone, superimposed in front of an overhead shot of smoking wreckage, "but this we know – a private plane went down just outside of Washington, DC. Officials haven't released names yet but – hold on a moment. What's that?" The newscaster reached up, pressing the earpiece close against his head.

Juliana forgot how to breathe.

They weren't saying it, but she *knew*. Knew the plane her father prided over, knew the custom paint job, even with half the body missing, flames licking the underbelly... *Juliana knew*.

"Mees Juliana! Police here to see you! Opeen!"

Her horrific wish had come true. She'd killed her parents.

The reporter gripped his mic and looked up. "From what we can gather there aren't any survivors. Everyone aboard is presumed dead. Stay tuned –"

Juliana's piercing scream split the air.

## Chapter One

"Hey." Rio nodded to his buddy Tom, controller of the remote. "Turn to Channel 5, would you? Just for a sec."

Feet kicked back on the glass-top coffee table, Tom clutched the remote as though his life depended on it. "You're kidding, right? The game's on."

"No, I'm not kidding." Rio didn't care if it wasn't his house. The early evening broadcast was seven minutes into the show. If he didn't miss his guess...

He rose from the easy chair and reached past the sofa's armrest, snatching the remote from Tom's death grip.

"Hey!"

"It'll only be for a minute. You'll survive." Rio dropped back into his chair, flipping the channel.

Juliana's face flashed on the screen. Ah, right on time. He smiled and settled in to watch.

As always, she was poised and graceful, untouchably beautiful in today's power-red business suit, white lacy top visible between the lapels—allowing just a hint of cleavage to show—and long blonde hair tied back as she delivered her latest weekend exposé. This one on the flagging real estate market in DC.

Tom kicked the side of Rio's recliner. "Not cool, you asshole. It's the middle of the fourth quarter."

"Redskins're winning by a mile," Rio muttered, entranced.

He'd always been entranced when it came to Juliana. Always. Even when it was so improper it could've gotten him strung up by his boots and left for coyote bait.

Right after he'd started working for her father, she'd called him out. Fantasizing over a too-young-for-him, too-mature-for-her-own-good confusing juxtaposition of woman-child, he'd let it slip during one of their conversations—*ángelita*.

*Ángelita*. His pet name for her, but only in his mind, only when his guard was down, only in the dead of night when he drifted off to sleep after a satisfying but hectic day at work and an even more intense workout—if he couldn't numb his mind, he could at least exhaust his body—only then did he allow himself to think of her that way.

Evidently, she'd gotten under his skin—and common sense—more than he'd known, because the word was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"*Ángelita*? What's that mean?" The teenage beauty just on the cusp of acquiring her driver's license and officially driving all men insane had pounced.

Rio's mind had ground to a halt. Pity his tongue hadn't done that sooner. "Shit. I said that out loud?"

Her eyes had narrowed, evaluating him. He'd known if she didn't believe his answer, she'd look it up, or worse yet, ask someone else. How had he gotten into this mess?

"Well? What did you call me?" Her brow furrowed, her grip on her backpack tightening. "Is that something bad?"

Clearing his throat, Rio had confessed, "Little angel," all the while wondering when he could plaster his tongue to the nearest frozen pole.

By the way she began smiling and preening, Rio knew she'd read every bit of meaning into it there was—and more. "You called me little angel? You called me *little angel*?"

Still choking on his own embarrassment, he muttered, "Must be the blonde hair. It certainly isn't the way you act."

No wonder she'd gotten detention again—and he'd been sent to pick her up. But whatever else he might want to say no longer mattered because Juliana was still giddily repeating, "You called me *little angel*."

"Juliana. Don't make anything of it. Don't. I call my dog that," he lied, finally getting his bearings, "and she pisses in my shoes."

"Oh." Her smile had dimmed, but not by much.

She'd gone on to ask about his dog and he'd had to make up an entire story about a nonexistent mutt with a penchant for shoes and T-bones.

Hearing Tom complain again, Rio blinked.

Damn. How was it that a lifetime had passed and yet he could still remember so much about her?

Shaking off the past, Rio leaned forward and listened intently to the professional newscaster she'd become, soothed by her cool, commanding voice as she rattled on about real estate bigwigs playing hardball in the difficult market by uniting and blocking potential buyers from those trying to sell their homes through smaller, less costly companies.

Boring compared to most of her highly controversial reports but of significant interest to Rio, considering that real estate was now his bread and butter. And she was right on the money with her assessment. He should know—his company was getting hit hard by the larger ones that wanted to shut him down when the market was already tight enough. Had he known she was going to cover real estate, he'd have volunteered his expertise. Or maybe not.

Scarred visages such as his definitely didn't belong on the tube.

"The 'Skins haven't got a chance," Tom muttered on a cough. "The Cowboys are gonna pull it out in OT. Turn this shit off. Get back to the game."

"Don't be a traitor. Redskins are heading to the Super Bowl..." Rio stood up for his team, even as he stared at the matured curves of Juliana's face—and body.

"Like hell," Tom grunted, jerking his feet from the table and plunking them on the hardwood floor with a thump. Crunching filled the room then he dug deep into the chip bowl, foraging for an unbroken tortilla chip. "Hey, Gina," Tom called to his wife. "Bring me a beer, hon!"

"Can it," Rio snapped. "I can't hear."

"Man, you have got it bad."

"Shh."

"Thanks for joining me tonight." Juliana nodded toward the camera, her model-worthy lips smiling widely. She closed out, signing off until her next broadcast the following weekend, leaving him frustrated. The way he always felt when her reports were over. "Until next time, this is Juli Reed, WBFE. News you can use from your hometown Channel 5."

Sighing, he flipped back to the game and tossed the remote to Tom. "See. Didn't kill you, did it?"

"Jesus."

"What?" Rio played it cool—he had to. Watching Juliana was bittersweet. It was great knowing that she'd overcome her parents' death and moved on...but it was never enough to erase the guilt.

Especially when he'd always had such an unreasonable attraction to the kid. She'd captivated him from the moment she paged him in the middle of the night, right after he'd been hired. She'd snuck out to party with her friends. Things had become a little wild and she wanted rescued. "Without a lecture," she'd told him, "or I'll never hear the end of it." Rio had brought her home and kept her confidence. But despite her age and the neon blinking *Off Limits* sign around her neck, he'd wanted her back then. He wanted her now.

"That reporter—Juli Reed. What's up with you and her?"

*I ruined her life. Ten years ago, I ruined her life.* His only consolation was that she didn't seem to be suffering any long-term consequences, judging by her success both personal and professional. Hell, she'd even been named one of the city's most eligible bachelorettes. Though he doubted she'd retain that status for long, not with—

"Earth to Rio! Well? What makes you jones so bad for her?"

Rio shrugged and reached for a handful of chips. *I killed her parents.* "Nothing. I just think she's a good reporter, that's all."

"Good reporter? Jesus, Rio, you practically climbed over the bar at SportsZone last week when the bartender dared to change the channel during one of her reports." Tom chuckled. "Good reporter, my ass—that's bullshit and you know it. You're obsessed with her."

Rio munched away, not responding. He should know he couldn't put one over on Tom—the guy was the best detective on the DC force.

"You know her, for real? Or is this just some creepy infatuation? Has my good buddy turned into a bona-fide stalker? Ooo, yeah, I can see the headline now... Real Estate Agent Turns Real Psycho—"

*"Hijo de la chingada! Dejalo!"*

*"English, man. In English."*

Tom wanted English? Rio gave him English. "Drop it, you son of a bitch. I'm not stalking her."

"Then what's up? Spill or I keep going. Real Estate Agent Goes Off the Really Deep End and...hmmm, let me think..."

Rio swallowed, trying to think of something plausible, something Tom would believe. He settled on a generic version of the truth. "Let's just say she's an old family friend."

"How old?"

"Hey, Gina? How about those beers?" Rio hollered toward the kitchen.

"Be there in a minute!" she called back.

"How old?" Tom persisted, and Rio could tell he wasn't letting it go.

"Old as these scars," he finally answered, the muscle in his jaw twitching. He rarely referred to the hideous reminders that slashed across his cheek and jawbone. Along his arm. Over his chest. Even his pelvis. Large parts of his skin had practically melted away in the blazing wreckage but at least *he'd* survived. Couldn't say the same for the rest of the crew or the two passengers. "I worked for Governor Reed. Juliana's personal bodyguard—or babysitter, rather. Head of security was ill, so I was ordered to cover him. I was on the plane when it went down. Shame too. Reed was a good man, a good governor." Rio crushed the remaining chip in his fist, surprised to feel it crumble against his palm. "Good father."

"Shit. And you feel responsible?"

Rio dusted his hand, picked up his empty longneck and pretended to drink, stalling. Seconds later he put the bottle down and ran his arm over his mouth before confessing, "I am responsible. I was too in awe of Reed and his position to hold firm when I sensed something was off. Had I followed my gut, that girl would still have her parents."

"Yeah, well, she ain't a girl no more. She's a woman—and too damn smart for her own good." Tom muted the game then lit a cigarette, deliberately surveying Rio the entire time. "Another Reed's about to get herself killed if she doesn't pull back."

Rio tensed, a five-alarm fire flaring in his chest. "What do you mean?"

Tom looked him straight in the eye and answered slowly. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but she's been poking her nose around where it doesn't belong. Asking

questions." He coughed and flicked his ashes. "Getting too close to things and people someone like her has no business even knowing about."

*Madre de Dios, no!* "What do you mean 'get herself killed'? She got a hit on her?"

"We've told her to back down. The Benitos are a nasty bunch. Ever since Oz died in prison, his sons have turned vicious, but we're close to arresting Tito and Diablo ourselves." Tom took a drag then exhaled. "Diablo has been in the public eye a lot more since his father's death. We still don't have a bead on Tito—damn fucker keeps his nose to the ground—but after a two-year investigation our men are in place. We've been putting enough pressure on him that it's just a matter of time before he makes a mistake and shows himself, if she'd get out of the way. She's makin' 'em skittish. Edgy men get jumpy and we—"

"Have they put a hit on her?" Rio asked again, needing to hear it, to be certain. Everyone in the greater DC area knew of Anthony "Tito" Benito and his younger brother, the aptly named Diablo—they didn't come any meaner than that bastard. Their family was legendary for drug trafficking and some of the most brutal gang killings in DC's history.

Problem was, the family was secretive as all get-out, pulling strings and arranging deals behind closed doors. The mystery only added to their control, and it was rumored that few ever saw Tito...that the ones who did were soon recipients of a bullet and a bloom—the guy was a freak, leaving flowers on the bodies he killed.

Just thinking about Juliana anywhere near bastards like those had his heart jumping into his throat. Rio absolutely refused to let Juliana get herself hurt. Or killed. He'd once vowed to protect her father—and his family. He'd failed when it came to her parents, but by God, Rio would protect Juliana with everything in him.

"I wouldn't doubt it," Tom finally answered through a cloud of smoke. "If you have any clout with her at all, tell her to step back. Hell, tell her to turn tail and run so fast she forgets she ever heard the name Benito. Pretty lady like Juli Reed has too much life in her to let messin' with a drug gang cut her time on Earth short." Tom flicked his ashes again then stared at Rio. "You know," he said, a calculating gleam in his eye, "I hear there's some big award ceremony tonight...some journalism-broadcasting thing. I think she's up for something. Be a shame if she won that award only to lose her life pursuin' another one like it."

Rio barely heard him. His mind was whirling with the knowledge Juliana was in trouble. Serious trouble. He'd watched her long enough, knew her rebellious streak from when she was a kid and figured she hadn't changed a bit. Likely, she had even less caution now. Juliana wasn't listening to the cops and she wouldn't listen to him. The woman was as bullheaded as they came. And determined.

Well, he could be just as determined. Rio hadn't survived a near-fatal crash, come through numerous surgeries and reconstructive skin grafting to let some feminine piece of froth he'd sworn to protect ruin her damn life. Just because she was in search of a story.

Come hell or high water, he was going to protect her. It was his duty. He owed the late Governor Reed that much. More than that, he owed himself.

"Hey, you two. Sorry it took so long." Gina came into the living room brandishing a couple of misting longnecks, which she handed to the men. "My sister called and I was having trouble hanging up. Who's winning?"

"Redskins, of course. Thanks, Gina." Rio made a show of taking a big swig of his beer then he stood up, trying to appear casual. "Hate to drink and run, but I just remembered something I gotta do."

"You're just too chicken to watch the Cowboys tromp all over your precious 'Skins in the last four minutes."

"You caught me." Rio faked a grin when inside he'd suddenly become a boiling cauldron of determination. He knew what he had to do. And he knew he had to do it now.

The only way to save Juliana from the Benitos—from herself—was to get her out of town. And she wasn't going to come willingly.

"Watch yourself," Tom called after him, but Rio kept walking, silently, *obsessively* more committed than ever to protect the woman who haunted his dreams. Asleep or awake.

## Chapter Two

*He'd better be worth it.*

Juli tipped back the rest of her champagne and with her free hand grasped the sexy stranger's collar and pulled him into her boss's empty office. She'd have gone to hers but there were too many partygoers congregating in that part of the building.

"Get in here," Juli whispered, placing her empty glass on the bookcase. With both hands, she delved inside the dress shirt she'd just unbuttoned with her left. Well, who would've guessed? Even after four drinks she was still ambidextrous. Or was it five? "Come here, sexy, and congratulate me properly."

He kicked the door shut and his broad palms went to her backside. He tugged up the silky skirt of her dress. It slid easily over her matching black satin thong and he hauled her against his groin. Their tongues tangled as they swapped the familiar taste of the elegant bubbly served at the party. He bit her lip, becoming a little rough—turning her on more than she'd expected.

Without meaning to, Juli reared back and pushed him away. Breathing heavily, she brushed back her disheveled hair and winked, showing she was still eager. Which she was!

"I've been watching you all evening," he cooed, shrugging out of his jacket. "But you already know that."

The hot-as-hell thirty-something was made-to-order—just what she needed to cap off what should be a memorable evening. She thought he was from their Baltimore affiliate, wasn't even sure of his name, but it didn't matter, not tonight.

Tonight, Juli had a slew of condoms stashed in her purse and she just wanted to get off. To celebrate.

To remember what it felt like to be a woman.

She just wanted to *forget*. Always to forget.

To forget that this weekend marked the ten-year anniversary of an event no one should ever have to remember or commemorate. So she wouldn't! Maybe for once she really *could* forget...

Forget the *date* of tonight's celebration, forget the cutting reality that her parents should have been here with her, clapping and beaming with pride...

Just as they should have been present at her high school graduation, her college graduation...at birthdays and Christmases...

But they weren't. Couldn't be. They'd missed everything. Forever.

And it was all her fault.



Tonight the familiar void was swallowing her whole and she had no one to blame but herself. She needed to forget...even if only in the buzz of alcohol, the ecstasy of orgasm.

Anything to escape how she felt right now. Being numb wouldn't cut it. Only sheer distraction would do.

"Damn, I want your sweet ass," her chosen distraction declared.

"Shhh! Not so loud." Moving farther into Barbara's office, Juli tripped over her own feet. *Whoa!*

Her screw-of-choice caught her, lifted her against him and rubbed his erection over her thighs. "Steady there, sweetheart. We can't have you falling down on the job, now can we?"

She wasn't that far gone, was she?

Not yet. Not enough.

Then again, she was screwing some guy simply because he was hot. This so wasn't like her, was such a potential mistake, but she didn't want to care. For once she wouldn't be perfect.

Enjoy tonight, regret tomorrow, she told herself.

It was like drinking too much, knowing a hangover waited in the morning. But drinking all the same. Like eating that second slice of pizza, knowing the action was courting extra pounds on the hips, certainly not needed, not when the camera added ten anyway. But eating *three* regardless. Or four.

But he was no slice of pizza. More like cheesecake.

Covered with strawberries and dripping in chocolate sauce...

Enjoy tonight. She pushed the edges of his shirt out of the way and flattened her palm on his exposed chest, scraping her nails downward. Regret tomorrow...

"Easy now," he grunted, mimicking her motions by running his hand down her chest and copping a feel through her anything-but-typical little black dress.

Made of pure silk that left her arms bare, the cowl neckline plunged halfway down her chest. The filmy layers concealed her breasts from view—just barely—but did nothing to stop their sway, and the flared hem flirted with the top of her thighs. Two inches shorter and she'd be arrested as a moving violation, or so the saleslady had promised when Juli first tried the dress on.

It was high time she wore something other than suits to work and sweats on her days off. Juli felt decadent and sexy tonight, or at least she had when she'd dressed. Now she just felt like a tramp. But a tramp about to get laid.

She should be ecstatic. Thrilled. Floating on air. She'd just won the coveted McDowell Journalistic Excellence Award for her exposé on the KKK in Maryland that had resulted in three arrests. The recognition validated her status as one of the top investigative reporters in the District of Columbia and practically guaranteed she'd

receive a raise and probably even that promotion to weekend anchor she'd been angling for.

So why couldn't she be happy and outside, celebrating with the rest of her coworkers at WBFJ instead of secreted away, letting some stranger grope her? Why couldn't she do as she always did, push aside thoughts of her parents and function normally?

Because of the date. Ten years too long they'd been gone. And she was breaking down.

His fingers snagged on her dress, plucking at her nipples. His pecs flexed beneath her nails.

Deep inside, Juli knew she was making a big mistake, but she didn't make a move to stop his pawing advances. If anything, she leaned into his touch and made little sounds of encouragement.

*Enjoy tonight, regret tomorrow.*

It had become her mantra.

They stumbled across the small room and the corner of the desk dug into her ass. Gripping her waist, her no-name stud placed her butt smack in the middle of Barbara's desk blotter. He tried to lift the narrow strap of her party purse—so blasted small, in addition to the condoms, it barely held her lipstick and key chain—which she'd slung over her head and across her torso. Juli clamped her hand on the purse to keep him from moving it. "Nuh-uh," she muttered against his mouth, nipping his bottom lip. "Can't go losing my press pass, can I?"

"Whatever." But he abandoned the purse strap and zeroed in on her crotch, placing both hands at her knees and stroking upward.

A frisson of awareness zipped between her thighs. Purse secure once again, she relaxed, hoping she wasn't leaving pussy cream on the 11th—that had been Barbara's birthday. Juli stifled a giggle as he nudged her legs apart.

Breathing hard, he reached between her thighs and slipped his fingers past the satin strip of her thong. Before she knew what he was about, he yanked aside the sheer panties, ripping the elastic over one hip. He circled her slick flesh once and drove his fingers in her pussy.

"You're nice and wet, aren't you?" he said hotly against her mouth. Plunging his fingers into her again, he kissed along her neck. "Got a rubber on you?"

Rushing much? Whatever happened to good old-fashioned preliminaries? Foreplay? His thumb pushed over her swollen labia, digging around, searching. *Bingo!* He teased her clit and Juli decided foreplay was overrated.

"Condoms?" She pulled his dress shirt out of his pants and tugged apart the remaining buttons, pressing her lips over the tiny hairs covering his chest. "Yeah, sure," she whispered. He had great pecs.

"So get it out," he growled. "Slide it on me."

"Mmmm."

She knew she should hurry if she wanted to score, but she just kept kissing him, undressing him and questioning herself. Why was she delaying? She wanted him. Her body was so into this. She was so wet—and horny. It had been too long since she'd been sated by something other than her hand or a battery-operated cock.

But her mind just kept stalling. What if they were caught? Barbara would kill her...

She wasn't drunk enough. That was the problem. And the solution.

She needed another drink.

"Wait." Juli slid off the desk, her dress bunched around her waist, and stood on wobbly legs. Her fingers rested on the button of his pants. "I need another glass of champagne. Would you get it for me, please?"

He gave an ironic laugh, his hands caressing the bare skin of her hips. "If you get any drunker, you won't remember this."

"Maybe I don't want to." She toyed with his fly. "Pretty please?"

"You may not want to remember, but I want you to." He spun her around and pushed her down against the desk. Her face landed on sticky notes affixed to the calendar and she stifled another laugh. She could smell herself. Her thong slid free from its moist resting place and dropped to the floor. She kicked the scrap away and her flimsy sandal went with it. She nudged the other one free and stood there, barefoot and bare-assed, waiting...

He ran several fingers up her crack and squeezed one buttock. "And I always get what I want. Tonight that's you."

Oh! So he was the dominant type? She could deal with that. Right now she needed that—needed him to get on with it. Before she changed her mind.

Juli lifted her ass in the air. Forget the booze. She had her a ready lay with caveman tendencies. "Here, put this on." She grappled in her tiny purse and retrieved one of the condoms. Without looking, she passed it over her shoulder, opening her legs wider. "Hurry up."

He took the packet and grunted once, twice. A moment later, his latex-covered cock nudged her wet and ready opening.

*Bang!* The office door slammed open.

"You asshole!" a woman's voice cried.

Shit!

"My lawyer's gonna have a field day with this!"

Wait a minute. It wasn't someone Juli recognized. Not her boss.

Thank God.

Oh crap. She'd still been caught—with a stranger's cock touching the lips of her cunt.

He stumbled back so fast a gale-force breeze blew across her butt. He cleared his throat. "Carol. Dear. Darling. I...um..."

*Carol dear?* Oh God, what had she done?

The pulse in her crotch thumped. Awkwardly sliding from the desk, Juli stood and tussled with her dress, trying to smooth it over her hips and bare bottom, but there didn't seem to be enough material, dang it!

"Don't 'Carol, darling' me, you cheating ass. Congratulations, you've provided me with the ammunition I needed to take you for *everything*," the woman cried. "Everything!"

Dress finally in place, Juli whirled around, bearing witness to the fire-breathing dragon in the doorway. The newcomer's gaze darted between Juli and the sexy stranger who was frantically buttoning his shirt – and his pants.

"How could you do this to me?" Carol sobbed. "With *her*?" Before Juli's numb mind knew what she was about, the woman lifted her full glass of champagne and swung her arm in an arc. In slow motion, the dancing wave sailed through the air and landed splat in Juli's face.

Tangy liquid splashed against her blinking eyelids, careened into her hair and rolled down her nose and cheeks. Juli licked her lips, her heart thudding madly.

She'd received her extra drink after all, hadn't she? Complete with enraged woman, it seemed.

Both well-deserved. *What had she been thinking?*

Scratch that. She hadn't. Only *feeling*. A dangerous thing, letting emotions rule. "Let me guess," she gasped, wiping her face and turning to the sexy – asshole – stranger who was shrugging into his jacket. "You conveniently forgot to mention that you're married?"

"Of course he is, you bitch!" the woman screeched. She hurled the empty glass toward his chest and stormed from the room.

He brought his hands up, knocking the glass aside, which landed against the desk with a piercing crash. He flinched, stared after his wife then looked at Juli. "I'm sorry, I..." His face was flushed. "Sorry. I –"

"Yeah, I bet you are." Sorry they hadn't finished before he was caught. "Just get the hell out of here!" Juli pointed to the door, her arm shaking. "Out!"

The not-so-sexy-now stranger disappeared from view, supposedly running after his wife. As far as Juli was concerned, the angry woman could have him. What a lout. Certifiable shithead.

Screwing a stranger in her boss's office was bad enough, but he had to be *married*? They had to get *caught*?

It just went to show her luck with men! Condom or not, battery-operated lovin' was the only safe kind. In the flesh, it seemed either her was heart broke...or someone else's.

Juli turned, surveying the mess she needed to clean up. So much for getting off. So much for celebrating.

She grabbed some tissues and wiped her face and neck. Cretin!

She'd like to toss a glass of champagne in *his* face. No, scratch that too. What she wanted was to conk the entire bottle over his lying, cheating head.

More tissues in hand, she approached her boss's desk, cringing at the stained papers and ruined calendar. Definitely a pussy-juice smear across the 11th. Ugh! She'd better get out of here, fast. With any luck, her boss would think the office slut had done it.

That, of course, wasn't her. Not normally.

She stumbled as she stepped back into her heels. Pulling the champagne-soaked silk away from her breasts, Juli blew across her chest. God, she felt clammy. She shook her damp hair then released the silk and headed for the door. If she could repair the damage to her appearance, avoid running into the married asshole from Baltimore—or his wife—and leave ASAP, this evening might be salvageable. Her career and all she'd worked for hopefully not destroyed.

Keeping to the darkened corridors, she made it to a satellite women's room without encountering anyone, thank God.

Finally finding a use for those stupid hot-air hand dryers, Juli bent forward and depressed the large chrome button enough times to spike the station's electric bill.

Immediate goal—dry hair and dress.

Next stop—home and a hot bath.

After that a glass of wine and her new waterproof dildo. She still had those memories and emotions to avoid. Even more so now.

"Damn." She tripped on her own foot, flipping her hair over and standing up. Then she giggled. "I look like a lion. I have sex hair," she said to her reflection in the mirror, noticing her flushed cheeks and glassy eyes.

Okay, maybe she'd skip the wine. But the bathtub and fake cock were a definite.

And she'd just remembered what she had waiting at home in her freezer. Who needed sex when they had ice cream? Peanut butter and chocolate would help...it always did.

Three minutes later, purse snug over her shoulder, Juli slipped out the back exit and into the night.

A nearly full moon had just cleared the horizon, its bright light guiding her way as she walked around the television station—only tripping once—to the parking lot on the side. Cool wind whipped her dried but now disastrous hair, created goose bumps on her arms and made her recently warmed nipples pucker from the chill.

Juli shuddered, both cold and ashamed, as she wound her way through the vehicles beneath the parking lights, wishing she could've grabbed her shawl. But chance Carol outing her? No. Way.

God. She was losing her touch. Not even able to spot a married man. Yeah, some investigative reporter she was, really deserving of that McDowell award. Dang it. She'd left that inside too.

She found her car easily enough and leaned against the side while she blindly searched her purse for keys. Cold metal met her fingertips and she pulled the chain out then promptly dropped the slippery booger on the ground. It pinged around then landed under her car.

Out of nowhere, Juli giggled. This was ridiculous. "Darn keys. I'm trying to make a fast getaway here."

She bent over to retrieve the chain and bonked her head on her car. "Ow!"

Juli put a hand out to steady herself. All right. Realization had set in slowly, but her clumsy body had made its point – she definitely wasn't okay to drive.

It was past time to call a taxi.

She remained crouched a moment, fearful she'd fall over if she stood too swiftly. Footsteps pounded the pavement behind her, coming up so loud and so fast that an unexpected jolt of adrenaline tore through her. What? Was Carol the Avenging Wife back with another glass of champagne?

Or had Barbara come to fire her for smearing the 11th?

No, these were a man's footfalls – great, clomping steps that reverberated through her brain. Up and down her spine. Maybe Mr. Asshole had returned to finish the deed? Heat flared anew at the thought.

Just as quickly, Juli squelched it, battling for a return of her good sense as she stood, using the car for balance. A quick glance over her shoulder showed this man was definitely larger than her doomed tryst partner. Oh great. She was about to be caught escaping her own party half drunk.

She turned to face him. "I'm fine," she said lightly. "Just dropped my keys."

There was no response. He stepped closer into the glow of the overhead parking lights and Juli found herself face-to-face with a big man. A really big man.

Several impressions hit her at once – tall, imposing, towering...

*Wearing a ski mask.*

Liquor and leftover desire drained from her in a rush. Opening her mouth to scream, Juli received a mouthful of leather glove when he clamped his hand across her face.

What was this? A party joke? The wife's on-call older brother? Juli's worst nightmare! She moaned behind his hand, the sound muffled. Straining against his hold, she kicked and flailed, but her captor didn't make a sound as he wrestled her over to a big vehicle...

Oh God, not a van! No, it wasn't. Gasping leather, she took in the shadowed outline. What was it? Some kind of SUV. With windows she could break?

The man's hand slipped slightly, allowing her cries to escape for a split second.

He pinned her against the vehicle, his breath hot in her ear. "Shhh...Juliana. I'm not going to hurt you."

He'd called her *Juliana*.

Shock held her immobile.

No one called her Juliana. Ever. No one had done that in years, not since her family...

*Died*. She forced herself to mentally say the word.

No one even knew her as Juliana now.

Strong arms wrapped around her and she automatically lashed out, her striking blows making him grunt.

"Don't fight me," he rasped, the smothering glove sliding from her mouth.

Her world came to a standstill and she forgot to protest when her attacker opened the back doors and forced her inside.

That voice. She recognized that voice.

Or did she?

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" Juli rolled over and stared at the masked man blocking her escape, his shadowed image illuminated by the interior light. She saw him grab a coil of rope. A half sob, half laugh caught in her throat, laced with the taste of champagne and regret. If only she could do this night over. "I know you, right? That's why I recognize your voice."

That had to be it. She'd won that award tonight—beat out two other reporters from WBFE alone. This was her coworker's bass-ackward way of saying congratulations. A prank.

This asshole had better be a stripper. That made perfect sense...right?

"Who put you up to this? Pete? Barbara?" she pressed, her mind spinning. "Jackie from accounting?"

Silent, he came at her with the rope and, instead of dodging him, she hiccupped. He caught her hands, quickly wrapping the rope around her wrists, and that's when it hit her—whatever this man wanted, it wasn't funny. Juli struck out, trying to slip free. Why had she downed so much champagne at the after-party? Combined with the two cosmos at the award banquet...

She was dizzy. Confused.

*Being freaking tied up.*

Why wasn't she fighting him harder? Because he smelled of piney woods with a dash of spice? Because she was losing her mind?

Why had she let that married jerk tear off her thong? Oh God—was the satin scrap still in Barbara's office? On the heels of that thought, Juli realized how close her captor's knees came between her legs, sensed the danger she was in, despite the man's almost gentle, caressing touch. It wasn't hard to imagine what he wanted.

Everything was moving in slow motion. It couldn't have been more than thirty seconds since she'd dropped her keys, but it seemed a lifetime.

Urgency slammed into her when he pulled the ropes taut. She scrambled to a sitting position, swinging at him with bound hands. The vehicle's carpet rubbed against her bare bottom. Her fists connected with his masked cheek, knocking his head to the side.

With a growl, he forced her back, his hand on her chest holding her down.

He climbed into the vehicle and crouched over her, pulling the door shut and leaving them in near darkness. Only meager light penetrated the tinted windows. The big man's weight pinned her, leaving her struggles worthless, her eyes staring blankly up at his ass while he bound her feet and she tried to comprehend what was incomprehensible.

Fact one. She was drunk.

Fact two. She was being kidnapped.

Fact three. She'd lost her fucking mind because this couldn't be real.

Maybe this was all some pseudo-erotic fantasy her depraved brain and deprived libido had conjured?

That was it—she'd hit her head when the avenging wife came at her. This wasn't really happening. None of it was. She wasn't outside being stolen. She hadn't been tied up by a stranger with a personal scent who...she sniffed...it seemed she should recognize.

Kidnappers didn't take the time to put on cologne! Bad men didn't smell good. They didn't!

"God," she cried, incensed. Juli blinked back tears, twisting from side to side. "Let me go!"

"I won't hurt you, Juliana. I promise," he muttered beneath his breath, tightening the ropes around her feet.

*Juliana...*

That voice. There was an accent to it. Slight but noticeable.

No one from the office referred to her as anything other than Juli. *Juliana* was another lifetime ago. Dead and buried—just like her past.

"Who are you?" she choked out, her throat tight. He spun to face her but didn't reply. The reflected light outlined his threatening ski mask. Hoarsely, she shouted at him, "Tell me who you are! Why are you doing this?"

No answer. Just glittering eyes, narrowed to slits, staring down at her through that hated mask. His heavy breathing was loud in the silence.

"Why did you call me Juliana?" She tried to roll from beneath him, but he didn't budge. Strong hands rested atop her thighs, his thumbs stroking her bare skin. She moaned, beyond understanding. Why was this happening to her? She'd just won an award, dammit! Almost gotten laid, fuckin' dammit. "Why?"



He pulled a dark cloth from his pocket.

Shit. A blindfold.

Or was that a gag?

God no. Why hadn't anyone come to help her? "Don't you dare gag me, you assho—"

She gasped as the material came down over her eyes, darkening her world, and a moment later his weight lifted off her. Damn his fucking hide! And hadn't her language gone to pot the moment her evening fuck went south?

Used to moderating her words since she spent so much time in front of the camera, letting herself go and freely filtering four-letter words throughout her vocabulary felt like a vacation. A really bad vacation.

Juli stifled the misplaced hysterical giggle that started to escape and forced herself to listen. Mind fogged from the combination of liquor and fear, she heard him leave the vehicle a moment then return with the *thunk* of a door and start the engine.

Juli curled into a ball, her body just as confused as her brain. She'd been high as a kite only minutes ago. Now...

It figured, didn't it? She'd lost everything else in her life, now she was about to *lose* her life.

As she did whenever overwhelmed, Juli listed things out, only this time the litany made her die inside a little more with each thought she enumerated.

Her mom and dad. Couldn't bear thinking about.

High school best friends. Abandoned Juli when their parents moved to Montana. It didn't matter that they couldn't help it—Teresa and Veronica still *left*, leaving Juli to face Sister Catherine and her sucky English class alone.

College best friends. First one abandoned Juli and college for charity work in Africa. Diane was infected by a parasite and died six months later. The other one got knocked up *then* married and dropped out of school and Juli's life.

College boyfriend number one. Abandoned her when a professional baseball team drafted him. He went off to make millions and make headlines...when he admitted he was gay.

College boyfriend number two. Abandoned her for the Guernsey triplets. What a blow that had been.

College boyfriend number three—

Well now, Jeff no longer walked the face of this planet and it was partially his fault she was in this mess to begin with. No wonder she had trust issues.

Everyone she loved, she lost. Maybe she deserved this. All her adult life she'd been punished for that one stupid selfish wish...

And this was no different.

The vehicle took off with a lurch, jarring Juli back to the present, swinging out of the parking lot and accelerating so fast she rolled, slamming into the side. “*Umpf.*”

She had to get a grip. Get over useless trips down memory lane. Get free. Find out who the hell her mysterious kidnapper was.

The fool had bound her hands in front of her and not all that tightly if she allowed her muscles to go lax. She tugged on the blindfold, tore out a few strands of hair in the process, but finally raised it over her forehead and off then took a good look at it when they passed under some street lamps.

A bandanna? What kind of professional kidnapper uses a faded bandanna to blindfold his victims? What kind calls them *Juliana*?

Trying not to make a sound, she dropped the makeshift blindfold and bit at the knots securing her wrists. Frayed rope pricked her lips, but she ignored the pain and dug her teeth in harder. Thank goodness she was tipsy. It dulled the soreness as she tugged and pulled, muted the burning around her wrists as she worked the ropes, biting them free. The process was slow, painful, as the rope chafed both her skin and her mouth. From here on out, forget the condoms, she was packing a switchblade in her purse.

Finally the rope gave way and she snaked one hand free. Stinging like the devil but free. She shook her wrists, allowing the remaining rope to fall, and flexed her hands then tugged at the knot binding her ankles. Clumsy fingers made for slow work, but she was able to ease the rope over her feet after slipping off her heels.

She’d gone from drunk and confused to sober and scared and he hadn’t slowed the car once.

While she’d been struggling with the ropes, the tires had hit smooth pavement, the low drone of high-speed revolutions filling the cargo section around her. She glanced out the back windows at an angle, lifting her head as high as she dared, hoping to spy a passing landmark. Everything was dark. It appeared he’d bypassed the interstate in exchange for back roads.

Remote back roads. Long, straight, lonely stretches, barren of other cars and people. Where they were alone.

Where he could do anything he wanted to her...

Where no one would hear her yell...

Oh God. Rising to her hands and knees, Juli searched the vehicle for a weapon. Something sharp or hard—anything to defend herself with, but the space was surprisingly empty. Where was all the junk people usually crammed into their trunks when she needed it?

All she found was a thin aluminum sign, flat like a chopping block. “Damn,” she muttered to herself. “I’m not slicing tomatoes here.”

But he might slice and dice her when they reached their destination. Fear renewed her efforts and Juli flipped back the layer of carpet and scored. “Hallelujah.”

She pulled at the carpet, lifting it out of the way. Her fingers collided with something long and skinny. The metal jack. The tire iron. She didn't know what to call it but instantly fell in love with the heavy gizmo. The perfect weapon. Her new best friend.

Prying it free and praying he hadn't heard the clang when it came loose, Juli clutched the metal to her chest and took a deep breath. Surprise was the only thing she had in her favor and she intended to take advantage of it.

Letting out a scream that would've stopped traffic on I-95, she jumped over into the backseat.

"Shit!" her kidnapper swore, slamming on the brakes as she came at him, arm raised. The ski mask was gone, but the dash lights illuminated his face and even in her muddled state, she recognized his profile. She'd stared at it so many times, fantasized about him so many nights.

Rio Tarin, risen from the dead.

## Chapter Three

"God no!" Juli staggered back and her weapon fell from lifeless fingers and thudded to the floorboard. The vehicle rocked back after screeching to a stop in the middle of the road.

*Rio? Alive?*

How could that be? Was she seeing a ghost?

Or her every fantasy come to life?

"Rio?" she whispered, her insides shaking as if an earthquake were ripping a chasm in her gut, which it was.

Jaw clenched, the man stared straight ahead. Juli fought the waves of dizziness that assailed her and clambered into the front passenger seat.

Seeing his profile, shock, dismay, *elation* surged through her, all vying for dominance in a mind that insisted this was not possible. Could *not* be happening. Thinking hurt, so she listened to her body instead of her brain.

Emotion—*need*—unfurled through her limbs and Juli stopped questioning why she'd responded to him as she had, why she hadn't gone completely berserk with paralyzing fear. Her body had recognized him even if she hadn't.

Her eyes flicked over his harsh face, tinted red from the glowing dials. She made out his dark Latino skin, saw the hard lines of his angular face and started hyperventilating over his heavily lashed eyes and gorgeous lips. The way he gripped the wheel so powerfully. He was so very strong, so alive.

*Alive?* Juli shook her head, fighting the sudden rage that swamped her excitement. "Rio? You're supposed to be dead!"

But if he hadn't died then what about her parents?

They'd said there were no survivors. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "Why are you here? My parents—are they...?"

The bastard didn't even glance at her, just flexed his fingers on the wheel, eased his foot from the brake and pulled onto the shoulder of the remote road.

"Answer me, dammit! What are you doing?"

"Kidnapping you." The husky timbre of the words washed over her as Rio settled the SUV into park and finally slanted her a sideways look. "Don't make this harder than it has to be, Juliana."

Perhaps she'd passed out at the party. Maybe this was a dream.

Unlatching his seat belt, Rio came at her, his personal aroma, that spicy combination of his woodsy cologne and *him* telling her unmistakably she wasn't

imagining this and infuriating her all over again. Seeing him—smelling him!—brought it all back...

The desolation, the horror, the *abandonment* of living through her parents' deaths and the death of her teenage crush and stupid, foolish ideology all at once. Going through all that already killed her inside once. Then Jeff too...

She couldn't go through it again! She wouldn't!

"No!" Juli went for the door, jerking the handle. Locked. She grappled with the controls, betrayal slicing through her. "Let me go, damn you!"

"Juliana." His hands caught her waist, lifting her. "Listen to me!"

Juli went wild. How dare he treat her like this? Tie her up. Manhandle her. Make her *smell* him again!

He was supposed to be dead. Dead! And now he was kidnapping her?

After lying to her for years.

She kicked and struggled, clawed at his arms and finally twisted free. Yelling like a madwoman, she climbed over the seat then the next, heading for the back.

"Juliana!"

Damn, it was dark! She reached the carpeted area and was searching blindly for the lever that would open the door to freedom when he arched over the seat and grabbed her ankle. "No!"

Rio dove in the back after her. He landed heavily on top of her, halting her escape. Before she knew it, he'd pinned her arms above her head. Her chest heaved, her heart ached, but Juli refused to stop struggling. "Lemme go!"

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't seem to make sense of the insensible. Only two things were clear. Rio had lied to her. But he was *alive*.

"Calm down, *ángelita*," he said softly. "Just calm down."

Right. Calm down. Forget that she was more than half drunk, that *Rio* was kidnapping her. That he was *alive*! Touching her...lying on top of her body...

"Calm down, Juliana," he repeated, making it sound as if chilling out were as easy as blinking.

Tears filled her eyes. "I don't understand," she whimpered. Her nipples had turned to concrete, pressing against his chest. Did he feel them? Know that she was instantly turned-on? Being *this* close to him, his body...

Was he offended? Or intrigued?

The way he affected her was immediate, all consuming, so very different from the married asshole she'd just fled. Her body, her very soul, was on fire, smoldering from too much excitement and too much booze, combined with years and years of unfulfilled longing. Of regret.

But it didn't have to be that way any longer...

Satisfaction—that longed for escape—was once again only a single unreasonable action away. But this time, with someone she cared about. It would be so easy to pull his head down, kiss him, seduce him...to forget everything but Rio.

A dead man. Forget that he'd just come back to life.

She gulped. Her body shuddered. "Oh God."

His grip gentled. Strong fingertips caressed her wrists. "I vowed long ago to protect your family. I failed your parents but I won't fail you. I can't, not and live with myself another ten years."

There was no missing the pain in his voice. The seriousness. Part of her was touched to the core, another part livid.

Was that all he was here for? Duty to her dead parents? And why in blazes hadn't he contacted her, told her he was alive? She'd thought they were friends...of a sort.

And what about right now? What about the way his pelvis was pressed precariously between her legs, where no panties covered her? What about the roll of quarters he was apparently carrying around in his pocket?

It wasn't fair. None of it was. Never had been.

She deserved answers.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Explain yourself." Her hand slid free of his grasp, moving between their bodies until she cradled his erection in her palm. "Explain this." She squeezed him, growing wetter. Hating how she responded to him. Loving it too. "Dammit! Why are you here?"

He wasn't. She was dreaming. Dead herself.

She had to be.

"Juliana..." He kissed her cheek, nuzzled her neck. God. She wanted to see him but it was too dark, so she pulled her hand free and closed her eyes and just felt. Felt his lips moving across her jaw, over her face...

Sensations fluttered through her body, little butterflies coming to life, lifting her onto their wings, flying, soaring... Her crotch twitched, seeking his cock.

"No!" she hissed.

Her body screamed *yes!*

Her mind whirled with memories. With questions. And finally, one very clear answer—Rio wanted her, just as she wanted him. The desire had always been there between them, unspoken yet powerful. She hadn't imagined it. They hadn't been in a position to explore it ten years ago. They were now—in the right position, that was.

She reached for him again and her fingers whispered over his cool, soft hair. Threading them through the thick strands, she tugged and abandoning all logic, murmured, "Kiss me, Rio. God please, kiss—"

His head dipped down. He pressed lips to her cheek then lower.

Suckling gently, his mouth explored her neck, his teeth grazing her skin, nipping, possessing her. She responded to him with a rush of wet heat.

No! This wasn't right. Forget her jaw, she wanted him on her lips. Between her legs.

No, her mind protested. She wanted answers. "Rio...no," Juli sobbed, changing her mind, turning her head to the side. "No!"

She needed answers not —

Again his lips softly sucked at her neck.

Not what she'd craved all night. Hell, for the past decade.

Despite herself, Juli leaned into his mouth, welcoming his seduction. "Oh Rio. Please..."

"Shhh," he whispered. "I'm going to take care of you. I promise."

She needed that.

"Yes, take care of me," she begged, lifting against him. Her nipples pressed into his chest, aching for his mouth. She brought her hands to his face and cupped his cheeks, guiding him to her breasts. One hand moved over mottled skin, oddly smooth where there should have been whiskers...

She sucked in a sharp breath as her fingertips explored a deep scar that ran along his left cheek. He stilled, hovering above her but not moving.

"From the plane crash?" she whispered.

"Does it bother you?" He cleared his throat. "There are more. Too many to count."

"Oh God, no." Her body heaved with emotion. "You're alive. Really alive."

And she needed to feel that. All of over her.

Releasing his face, she pushed at the neckline of her dress, hearing part of it rip in her fury to expose herself. Once freed, she lifted her breasts to him, her nipples jutting forth. "Rio, touch me."

His hands molded her breasts and his lips claimed her right nipple, drawing sharply. His tongue flicked the bud, circled it...teasing her with the promise of a release that had been ten years in the making.

"The other one too," she begged. How she needed to feel him.

Rio shifted to her other breast, the day-old, sandpapery whiskers covering one side of his face, creating prickles over her skin. His mouth enveloped her, obliterating thought. *This* is what she'd needed, what she'd craved.

Juli didn't care that their legs were all squished together, that her knees were starting to hurt. She didn't care that she had more questions than answers. She'd had a really shitty night and was finally receiving what she deserved. Her dream lover — exploring her body, licking her.

His hand slid along the curve of her waist, past her hips, while his mouth increased its attentions. Suckling her breast fiercely, he lifted his weight off her and raised the hem of her dress, drawing the silky fabric past her buttocks and up to her waist.

Freeing her breast, he trailed kisses along her torso past the remaining silk. When he reached her bared abdomen, he parted her knees. His face dove between her legs and she heard him inhale. "What happened to your underwear?"

Alarm flared through Juli. Would he be angry to hear she'd been with someone else tonight? That not all of the liquid desire running from her was caused by him?

"You don't want to know." Now that she knew he was alive, she was pissed at herself. She'd always wanted to save herself for him. She'd shot *that* plan to hell just months after the crash. "Doesn't matter. Does it?"

"Hmmm." His tongue darted out, tasting her. "Did you have sex tonight?"

Shivers shimmied up her spine and she lifted her pelvis, brushing herself against his mouth. *Please don't let this be a joke.* "I wanted to," she answered precariously, "but no."

"Interesting." Several fingers dove into her ready sheath. He swirled them around then began pumping into her, testing her. "At your party?"

She met his thrusts. "In my boss's office. With a stranger. We were caught."

Rio growled, low and deep. "Damn."

"I can't believe I just told you that. He was married. I didn't know."

Rio pushed his fingers deeper inside, *harder*. "Seems you're quite the woman now."

He didn't sound mad—he sounded almost *proud*. "Does that turn you on?" she asked, biting her lip. Rio Tarin was about to eat her out!

"More than it should." Again his tongue darted past his lips, dipping into her. He pulled one side of her swollen labia into his mouth. She felt his teeth graze against the sensitized flesh. Her hips jerked, pushing her flush against his mouth. He released her and swiped his tongue along her slit. "You taste, *smell*, so grown up and delicious. So naughty."

He rolled her to the side and smacked her butt, leaving a sting.

*More than it should.*

*Naughty.*

None of her multiple-night stands with various sex toys—much less the married jerk—had ever made her feel like this. So fiercely aroused, instantly horny. Even the way Rio was talking to her made her hot. Her mind, her body, swam with excitement. Her hips bucked in response. "Make me come, Rio."

His mouth claimed her clit, sucking hard as he drilled her with his fingers, his other hand occasionally slapping her ass.

Juli rocked against him, riding his hand and face. His style of lovemaking was more than she'd ever expected, a fantasy come true. It seemed she'd waited a lifetime to experience such sheer pleasure, yet the release promised to be even more mind-blowing than she could imagine.



Exploring her swollen flesh, he devoured her, eating and licking her pussy, driving her toward a pinnacle. Juli writhed, lost in a swirl of emotions. Arousal, excitement, relief...fear. How she wanted to climax, yet she held on, refusing to let it end – because then she'd have to be rational again. She wanted this to last forever.

Rio was alive. Licking her. Taking her away from a decade of pain.

Suddenly, sex...*life*...seemed different somehow. Fresher – as though she'd been given a new start.

His tongue dove high in her pussy and he lightly tapped several fingers over her exposed clit. Juli's body rebelled, her cunt convulsing with a powerful orgasm. Every muscle tightened as her loins erupted from ecstasy while Rio continued to lap at her trickling desire, drinking her up.

And just like that, it was over. Juli shook, her entire body humming with delight, her mind protesting. She didn't want this to end. Not now. Not ever. How could she relinquish him now? She couldn't –

She pushed him off, into the side of the vehicle and stared up at him.

"Rio Tarin," she whispered, testing his name on her lips. Through the darkness their eyes met. Their souls touched. Never had she felt more connected to a man than she did in that moment. It made her crazy, feeling so off base.

Quick, satisfying fucks she was good at – or not, given her recent track record. Getting off, easing the physical ache with her hand, a favored vibrator or a convenient dildo...

*That was easy. But this...*

Gazing at Rio, gauging the emotion glittering in his black eyes yet shielded by his masked expression and the night, listening to her blood thrum in her ears, facing the ever-present fear of abandonment that always hovered near the surface... *This* was intolerable.

So she wouldn't. Juli didn't have to face any emotion or feelings. Why should she? She was an expert at ignoring them. Wiping away the errant self-analysis, she focused on what was easy, what she knew. Her body. Pleasure. *Escape*.

She crawled to her knees and dove for the button on his waistband, hungry to provide for Rio the same relief he'd granted her.

Juliana wrestled with the fastening of his jeans, acting frantic to get in his pants. Rio covered her hands with his, attempting to pull away. Embarrassment burned in his chest. "No. Don't."

How could he want her so very much yet not be solid as a man should?

But it was always like that. His cock rose, it fell. He could get hard, he could desire intensely, but when his pants went down so did his erection.

The moment he thought about a lover seeing his scars, self-consciousness melted his arousal. After a number of repeat performances, he'd stopped trying.

*Oh God. No. You're alive. Really alive.*

Rio hadn't been positive what she'd meant. Did his scars bother her, or was Juliana sad that he'd been hurt?

"Yes," she said adamantly, seductively. "I want to return the favor and I want to taste you. It's only fair."

Rio groaned as she practically ripped his jeans down. He was cornered in the back of his SUV, crouched on his knees with no escape, and Juliana was determined, fighting her way into his boxers with her hands, grabbing, finding, *feeling*...

"Please, baby," he pleaded. "You don't know what you're saying."

Juliana's fingers met the head of his half-hard cock and she scooted his boxers out of the way, exposing him fully. "Don't take this away from me. I've dreamed of touching you far too long."

How could he say no to that? To her?

His cock jerked at the thought. He wanted her too – always had. He just didn't want her to see the burn marks that covered his body. To be repulsed. He didn't want to get a full erection only to have it wilt when he saw the disgust on her face or she started touching him.

He didn't want to suffer through her pity and his own humiliation.

It'd be like dying all over again.

Juliana brushed her fingertips across the uppermost edge of the scar she'd revealed on the left side of his groin. She paused, glancing up at him. "More?" Pain filled her voice.

"Many." He tried to push her away. "You don't have to do this."

She refused to back down, her fingers pressing into his hip. "Do you really think your scars will bother me?"

"They bother me!" Then he confessed something he'd never spoken aloud, "And every woman who's seen them cringes." He hated the self-doubt he heard in his voice. "You will too."

"I shouldn't have to tell you that's patently ridiculous."

Juliana chastised him like a schoolboy, but he felt anything but young. Old beyond his years. Too old for her. He was strong enough he could push her away easily, but a glutton for punishment, he refused to stop her exploration a second before she ceased on her own.

Rio clenched the muscles in his abdomen and fisted his hands by his side, silently enduring her inspection.

It shouldn't take long.

She'd either change her mind and make excuses or get him off faster than an Olympic sprint and *pretend* as if it weren't a chore.

Rio swallowed a groan as she traced her fingers over him, investigating by feel what she couldn't see clearly in the weak light. Her touch roved over his thighs and up his groin, which was only partially covered in hair. She continued on to his waist where the marks on the left side of his body deepened, the worst of them hidden by the tails of his shirt. She rose up and planted a soft kiss on the damaged skin covering his hip. Her fingers tightened around his flaccid member. He held his breath, waiting.

Waiting for her to drop his cock, tell him to get the fuck away from her.

"Ridiculous," she said again. "To think I'd let this opportunity go by. I'll show you how much—with my mouth."

Then she kissed him. Placed her lips on the head of his cock and kissed him.

He shuddered at her touch on the supersensitized area, afraid to breathe, trained to expect revulsion but instead receiving something totally different. She desired him, even mutilated as he was...

He felt a tingling along his shaft and something deep inside him shifted when she swallowed him, slowly rubbing her lips and tongue from the base of his cock to the tip then back again. Her eyes gazed up at him, glistening in the dark, sparking with her passion. Or so he imagined.

He'd always thought she was beautiful, but seeing her like this struck him in the gut, prompted him to get off his proverbial ass and participate. He tangled his hands in her hair, amazed as his rod lengthened, thickened beneath her tongue, his entire body swelling with pride and pleasure as she loved him with her mouth.

Crouched on her knees before him, she looked so wild and wanton, so sexual...

He couldn't stop watching her, damning his tinted windows and thanking his mind for supplying the details.

Juliana...the little rebellious spitfire had captured a piece of him from the moment they'd met when she asked if she could borrow his gun. He'd strangled on his reply and she'd winked and said, "Oops! I meant *gum*!"

Well, she was *all* grown up now, her lips chewing over his cock in such a way *he* wanted to pop.

Rio couldn't believe how he grew harder and harder for her, how her tongue continued to lick over him as if she never wanted to stop. He wasn't losing his erection either, as he'd feared he would. As he always did. By damn, he was going to come. Soon.

Blood pumped through his shaft, through his body, heading straight to his heart. The past was gone, the present forgotten. There was only Juliana, the sounds of her moans. Her mouth and what it was doing. Her obvious enthusiasm.

Rio suddenly had a vision of how he'd last seen her in this evening's broadcast—God, that seemed like days ago—in her power-red suit, that little hint of tempting cleavage...and here she was, sucking his dick and he'd dined on those beautiful breasts only minutes before.

His quick orgasm shocked him. Semen spurted from his cock into her mouth as he jerked violently, the release close to painful as he kept coming, lunging past her lips again and again. Juliana drank him, drawing every last bit of cum from his cock, swallowing, humming her pleasure, her encouragement.

Rio groaned and released a hot breath as his body finally stilled. His heart pounded furiously. He brushed her hair away from her forehead and tried to speak so it didn't sound as if he'd just clocked a mile under five. "Damn, *ángelita*." *Madre de Dios!* He was panting. "Damn."

She kissed the tip of his cock, smiling up at him. "Where've you been half my life?"

*And why are you here now?* Rio still hadn't explained himself, his scars, his...*death*.

Or why he'd tied her up and tossed her in the back of his vehicle. Why she was kneeling before him, wet and wanting him inside her.

"Rio, please. I need answers." She rested her cheek against his loins, breathing in the sweaty scent of sex and unfulfilled desire. "Don't torture me."

"The Benitos." He traced her eyebrow with a finger that trembled.

"What kind of answer is that?" She wanted to know where he'd been the past decade. "Tell me—"

"You're snooping around where you have no business," he interrupted harshly. "You keep going and you're going to get yourself killed."

She flinched and pulled back, gazing up at him. *That's* what this was all about? "They wouldn't dare. I'm in the public eye." Juli turned her head, avoiding his tender touch. Now she *was* sickened. And offended. And hurt, by damn. How dare he? "I'm close to exposing them and I can handle myself, thank you. In case it escaped your notice, I'm a big girl now."

"Trust me, I noticed."

She ignored the sultry whisper and kept going, her irritation skyrocketing. "I can take care of myself without having you come to my rescue. Galahad you're not."

What was he thinking? Duty, no doubt.

For ten years he'd been dead. Ten years she'd been dead inside, needing answers. Needing her parents. Needing him, damn his hide. Grieving. *Ten years!*

"They said no one survived the crash. All...gone. Dead," she said flatly.

"I almost didn't survive, but I'm here. Sound mind, at least."

She heard what he didn't say—not sound in body. It pissed her off and she lashed out. "How dare you say that when..." She rearranged her ripped dress over her breasts and wrapped her arms around herself, hugging tight when she really wanted to pull him to her and hang on for dear life. "My parents?"

She already knew the answer. She'd seen their coffins lowered into their graves.

And maybe he was responsible—the man she craved above all others. If he could deny her, hide from her all this time...

"I failed them," he confirmed in a gritty voice. "I won't fail you a second time. I can't."

Her heart broke. "You didn't have to kidnap me. You could have talked to me." She thought of the way he'd just eaten her out, the way she'd roused his erection and swallowed his semen. Just what did she mean to him? She exhaled in frustration. "Ask me on a date. Right now. Ask me to dinner." *To breakfast. Anything.*

"You're too close, Juliana," he said matter-of-factly, zipping his jeans and ignoring her provocative suggestion. "You're marked by the Benitos, and according to my friend on the force, you refused to heed their warnings to back down. So you had your chance and now you're coming with me. Whether you like it or not."

"Like hell." Juli's voice cracked. Deep inside she knew she had no choice. Rio wasn't giving her one...and she wasn't sure she wanted out, but rolling over meekly wasn't her style. And what did he mean *marked*?

"I can tie you up again, tighter this time," Rio offered.

"No," she whispered. "*Please.*" Was she asking him not to? Or daring him to do it? "Just take me home."

With a nod, he opened the back door and helped her down. "We'll stretch our legs a bit then you can sit up front with me. As long as you promise to behave."

She took his hand, hating herself for it. Hating herself more for how her body trembled at the innocent touch when he hadn't come close to explaining his sudden appearance or crazy actions.

"Ow." Gravel pierced her bare feet. When had she lost her shoes? Oh yeah—the ropes.

Liquor, sex, *Rio*... It was mind-boggling. She needed a moment. A lifetime.

"Stop!" She jerked him to a standstill. Her throat clogged. "Just hold me a minute," she said past the emotion, plastering herself to his chest. "Please, just hold me."

Hesitantly at first then with fierce strength, his arms came around her.

Juli had come home.

## Chapter Four

*"Move, boys, move!" The command burst from Cordell Ramsey, adrenaline surging through him and giving strength to his muscles and vocal cords.*

*Trained for quick action by years of war, he lifted his semi to eyelevel, finger on the trigger. "Sarge! We got insurgents coming in! We need cover fire!"*

*Heart in his throat, tongue burning as if he'd bitten clear through it, Cord swore under his breath and analyzed the situation. Not good.*

*Definitely not good.*

*But was it ever? "Damn rebels won't call it quits."*

*The boys had been taking a piss and talking about their dicks – they were always talking about their damn dicks – while he stood lookout. Now his patrol scrambled, grabbing weapons, taking up defense as the speeding cloud of dust approached faster than a twister, heralding the arrival of armed rebels.*

*Sweat trickled down his forehead. Disneyland. When this was all over, he was going to goddamn fucking Disneyland.*

*No matter how many attacks he lived through, it never became any easier. Facing death still scared the shit out of him.*

*Bracing himself for the patter of bullets that always came after the sound of breaking tires, Cord ducked behind a huge oak tree –*

*A huge oak tree.*

*"Shit," Cord swore angrily, loosening his death grip on his fishing pole. His entire body strummed with energy. His tongue still on fire – from the damn Red Hots in his mouth.*

*He was losing it.*

*Disneyland. Yeah right. Coming home to discover his grandpop dead and the family home in shambles was no ride at a fucking amusement park.*

*Not that any roller coaster could whip the war from his mind. What a pipe dream that'd been. Didn't matter how long he'd been looking forward to returning home, he was foolin' himself if he thought he'd left the Middle East behind. Suppose in some ways, there would always be blood on his uniform – even the one stuffed upstairs in the closet since his return four days ago.*

*Taking a deep breath, he glared at the black SUV speeding down the long drive and churning up a big a cloud of dirt. Now who the hell could that be? And what were they doing on Ramsey property?*

*The old homestead and former tobacco plantation was remote by anyone's standards. If a body hadn't grown up here – which he had – they'd need a compass, a*

bloodhound and a hearty dose of luck to find the place, it was that far off the beaten path.

So who was showing up this morning uninvited?

Carrying his breakfast—trout, just as he'd had every morning since his return—Cord made his way to the back door of the run-down old plantation house he called home. Willow Creek sure wasn't what it used to be, except for one damn thing—the creaky screen door that slammed behind him. Matched the one in the front—screen doors with the most persistent squeak ever to irritate a body's eardrums. Seemed no amount of oil, grease or *elbow* grease could eradicate the annoying sound. But that just made it all the more sweeter now. The sound of home.

*And who dared invade his?*

He tossed the fish in one side of the sink then washed his hands in the bowl of water in the other.

Visitors. Just what he always never wanted.

But maybe he could catch a ride with them, get into town. He needed to buy a car and supplies—needed food that didn't involve him catching it—not to mention he needed to find out what happened to Grandpop and where he was buried.

When Cord had hitched the seventeen miles to the entrance of Willow Creek then hiked the remaining six on the dirt road, he'd expected to find his grandfather. He'd expected a homecoming. Maybe even a barbeque. Beer.

Instead he'd found a note from their small-town doctor tacked on the front door, yellow, weathered and wrinkled, nearly a year old. Barely readable but requesting Cord come see him.

He hadn't needed to. He'd easily understood the unspoken message as he'd explored the home he'd grown up in.

One of his fondest memories as a kid was of the meticulous care Grandpop had taken of the estate, a plantation on fourteen-hundred-plus acres that had been in their family for centuries, practically since Washington crossed the Delaware. Granted, only a fraction of the land had ever been planted, but for Cord, the property represented all he'd ever wanted—family. Roots. Security.

Sure, when he'd joined the Army, Grandpop's health had been sliding a tad, along with his ability to do physical work. But the place had been spiffed up and spit-polished to a shine. Not anymore.

He'd arrived to find a fucking herd of rats and a nest of snakes had invaded the place as if they owned it and the damn roof leaked in two rooms until he'd climbed up and nailed some boards as a partial fix. There was no food, no phone and no electricity—until yesterday, that is, when the lights had clicked on. Scared the shit out of him too, coming on in the middle of the night, half as many of the light bulbs popping out as soon as they flicked to life. But discovering who the mysterious electricity fairy was paled in comparison to what else Cord had to face.

Grandpop was gone.

Cord had carved a rustic wooden cross and anchored it beneath Grandpop's favorite willow, out near the creek, commemorating the old man's life in lieu of a proper funeral. He only hoped someone else had seen fit to provide that. And why the hell hadn't he been notified about Grandpop's death? Just one of several things Cord would like to take up with Uncle Sam.

But survival always came first. The past few days he'd spent cleaning what he could, cursing what he couldn't, making do with meager supplies and fishing for his food.

Cord dried his hands on the tails of the flannel shirt he hadn't bothered to tuck in and headed to the front of the house to greet his visitors. Anger flared in his gut when he heard first the screen then the wooden door open without so much as a knock. "What the —?"

There, in the doorway, was a sight from a whole different type of war. His heart shriveled and his breath dried up as he took in the limp, blonde woman being carried by a mean-ass motherfucker. Morning sunlight illuminated them, slicing in through a cracked board in the porch roof and highlighting her torn black dress, the chafe marks and bruises on her wrists, the black streaks running down her cheeks from crying.

Cord was ready to snap. Jaw clenched so tight he could hardly speak, he asked, "Can I help you?"

Meaning *her*. Because if anything was apparent, that woman's welfare was in serious jeopardy.

And now so was the bastard holding her.

Judging from the mottled skin on part of his face and one arm, the man was no stranger to a good fight, but Cord wasn't about to let some woman be assaulted in his home. It was crystal clear the fucking bastard had brought her to the secluded house for the sake of hurting her further, where no one could hear her screams.

Over Cord's dead body.

Black eyes analyzed him, sharp and deadly. "What are you doing here?"

There was accusation in the tall Mexican's words and Cord wanted to tell the son of a bitch to get the hell off his property. And leave the blonde.

"Well, as to that..." Cord stepped forward, itching to take a swing but wanting to catch the other man off guard. He forced his clenched fists to unfurl. "I'd say I'm the owner of this house and *I* belong here. Now what are you —"

The woman moaned and nestled against her attacker's chest, obviously incoherent. *Shit*. Cord's heart went out to her. "What happened?"

As if he couldn't tell.

He fought to appear unaffected. He had to keep it together, couldn't go tearing the bastard apart until he knew the woman was out of harm's way.



The man angled his body until the scars weren't visible and glared at Cord with his right eye. Yeah, as if *he* had a right to be suspicious. He'd just broken into Cord's home with a woman he'd probably raped. Or was about to.

Cord felt his body start shaking again. Men like this were worse than shit.

"Well?" he demanded, wishing his hunting rifle wasn't upstairs stashed away in a closet. Wishing the very thought of it didn't make him sweat. Despite the array of wild game on the property, he hadn't been able to bring himself to touch the gun since he'd come home. Not even for food.

"She's tired. Asleep."

He could fake this. "Why don't you put her down?"

*So I can knock you out.*

To his surprise, the man walked through his home as though he belonged there, carrying the female straight to the couch where he gently placed her unconscious form on the plaid cushions, giving Cord a glimpse of delicate bare feet. *With reddened ankles.*

Before Cord could assimilate that, her attacker sent Cord reeling when he grabbed the square afghan Nana had crocheted off the back of the couch—practically the only homey thing left in the room—and shook it out, letting it drift down to cover the woman. Then he turned to Cord, hands on his hips. "You want to explain yourself, mister?"

"I was hoping you'd go first," Cord drawled, his eyes drawn to the helpless woman when she sighed in her sleep. *Not around her*, he told himself. She'd been through enough. "Why don't we step outside?"

Cord headed back the way they'd just come and banged out the front door, his rage causing him to forget to be quiet.

"Isn't much to discuss." The stranger followed him outside, stepping from the porch onto the grass under the huge oak that shaded the front yard. "This is my house and you're in it."

*His house?* "Just who are you?"

"Rio Tarin." The answer came quickly—too quickly to be a lie.

"Well, *Rio*..." Stupid-ass name. *River*. Cord suddenly wanted to drown him in the creek where he fished. "You must be mistaken, because this here is Ramsey land. Been in my family for generations."

Cord didn't waste any more time on words. The moment Rio blinked, Cord's fist was flying through the air, connecting with flesh-covered granite. Damn—the bastard had a hard noggin.

Rio's head swung to the side from the blow but he quickly regained his stance, breathing like a Spanish bull ready to charge. "Back down, *niño*, if you know what's best for you."

"This is my damn house! You bring a woman you raped to my house? *Goddamn you!*" Cord was dancing, ready for an all-out boxing match. The way he felt, he could go

ten rounds with the bigger man. A hundred! Cord swung again, punching the asshole's ear. "And don't call me a *kid*!"

A wail filled the air, followed instantly by a roar. It only took the bastard a second to gather his bearings and shake off the blow.

Cord tightened his fist, which burned from hitting bone. "This is *my* house! Get lost, asshole!"

"Not anymore it's not!" Rio came at him full force, ramming his shoulder into Cord's ribs and knocking him to the ground.

Rio's fists were everywhere, coming at Cord one after the other. *Pop! Bam!*

Cord had a flashback to the old *Batman* sitcom fights only he wasn't battling the Joker in fabricated Gotham. He was fighting for his life and this was no joke. He ducked what blows he could, suffered what he couldn't and gave back as good as he got.

*Pow! Pow!*

The double punch caught him in the face and showing no mercy, he aimed as many punches as he could to the man's scarred side, searching for weakness but finding none. "What are you," he yelled, feinting left, "a damn boxing champ turned serial killer?"

When he got on top of things, Cord was going to break the bastard's nose. Hell, his neck. Hell—*his dick*.

Cord took a hit to the mouth, another to his eye. Pain radiated through his head as he threw Rio to the side, determined to avenge the lady's honor or die trying. Just as he pinned Rio's legs, Rio swung his head through the air, slamming into Cord's chest, knocking the air from his lungs.

"No," Rio fired back when he straightened. "I'm a damn bodyguard turned real estate agent."

Cord dodged another swing. "Who specializes in finding out-of-the-way places to bury the women you molest?"

Growling like a madman, Rio leapt on top of him. They rolled through the grass and dirt, throwing punches and kicks, jamming knees and elbows.

*"Ompf! Not here you're not! Not on my life! Or property!"*

A solid blow landed near his nose and Cord bellowed like an injured animal, focusing all his energy into gaining his feet. Putting Rio down.

He managed to get on his knees before Rio's fist again rocked into him, this time smashing directly into his nose. Blood spurted, running into his mouth, dripping to the ground.

That did it.

Cord leapt to his feet and his hands went for his belt, quickly unfastening the buckle. He was going to whip some decency into the son of a bitch.

"Stop!" A feminine cry filled the air. "Stop fighting! Just stop it!"

Distracted, Cord whirled around to find the blonde standing behind them, panic in her eyes.

"Boy, I'm no pussy to just lie back and take your beating." Rio plowed his head into Cord's stomach, knocking him off balance. Cord crashed into the dirt, gasping, unable to breathe.

"Stop it!" she cried again. "Stop it, Rio! Please!"

"What's wrong with you two?" Juli yelled. "Stop killing each other!"

"He came after me first." Rio complained, wiping at his lip. In broad daylight, she saw the full force of his scars for the first time. More than that, she saw him beating up a man. How could Rio be such a brute? She'd always admired him, thought him strong of character, and from what she could tell, this man had only been trying to protect his home. And *her*.

She wanted to run to Rio and kiss every visible scar, wanted to shake some sense into him for keeping her in the dark all these years. Wanted to slap him silly after watching him pound into this other guy.

Her reaction to Rio was too confusing to deal with so Juli rushed to the stranger's side, ignoring how the prickly grass scratched the bottom of her feet. Once she reached him and knelt, her jumbled hair blew around them both. Juli ignored that too and placed a hand to his heaving chest. "Oh God. I'm sorry." Seeing the damage done to his face, she shot Rio a dark look then focused on the man in the dirt. "Are you all right?"

Guilt struck through her. Judging from his worn clothes and the state of the house she'd just woken in, his life was hard enough without the trouble she'd brought into it. Well-muscled but thin, he looked like a shaggy, dirty puppy. Blood oozed from his nose and a cut on his lip.

Her protective side flared and she lifted the hem of her dress and dabbed the blood from his face.

"*Hijo de la chingada!* Juliana!" Rio barked. "He could have AIDS for all you know."

"Shut up! Haven't you done enough? I fall asleep, thinking you're driving me home then wake up God knows where to find you attacking this man. Leave me alone!"

Like two rangy junkyard dogs fighting over a bone, the men kept casting possessive glances at her while practically snarling at each other.

Beneath her touch, the stranger's breathing steadied and he stared at her, uncertainty shining in his gold and green eyes. Sad eyes, as if he were no stranger to fighting. She pushed her hair behind her ear and touched his face, stroking his cheekbone above the scraggly razor stubble. Even disheveled as he was, he was handsome. Rugged but almost charming in appearance. Full lips, square jaw, hair the color of honey and wheat.

Darn, but her hormones must be in overdrive to be noticing so much.

"What's your name? Do I need to call a doctor?" Juli asked, surprised at how wired she felt knowing that Rio had fought *for* her.

"Cordell Ramsey, ma'am, but please call me Cord," the stranger answered in a sexy drawl, dismissing his injuries with a wave. "What about you, darlin'? Did he hurt you?"

The malevolent look he shot Rio warmed Juli to her toes.

She couldn't help her smile. What a gentleman, concerned about her even when he was lying beaten and bloodied. Rio should take a lesson or two from him.

"Here, let me help you." She slid her hand under his head and lifted his chin. "Tilt your head back. It'll help you stop bleeding." She tested the bridge of his nose then pinched his nostrils. "I don't think it's broken."

"Juliana!" Rio came to her side. Gripping her shoulder, he pulled her back, dislodging her hand. "Jesus, girl, you're flashing us both. Stop touching him! He's filthy."

Cord snorted then coughed, no doubt having swallowed some blood at the nasty comment.

"I'm not a *girl*." She shot Rio an ugly glare. Had he no manners, no heart? "I'll make my own decisions, thank you." She turned back to the man lying beneath her. "It's *Juli*, by the way."

"Thanks, Juli, for comin' to my rescue and all." Still keeping his nose tilted, Cord sat up, his lip curled in anger as he directed his next words toward Rio. "Leave the lady alone." His arm wrapped protectively around her waist. "And get the hell off my property."

Jealousy flared in Rio's eyes, but she let Cord hold her. His embrace felt strangely comforting after the night she'd had. And with the way Rio was treating her, not telling her he was alive, glowering at her even now, let him be green. Served him right.

"This *isn't* your property," Rio gritted out. "I bought it at tax auction. Received the title in the mail—with my name on it—not so long ago."

Uncertainly flashed in Cord's eyes. For a moment, he just stared at Rio then he pushed her away and stood. "What'd you pay?"

"Not much," Rio answered in an even tone that spoke more than any number could.

"I left him the goddamn money. Sent him every penny I could! More than enough!" Clenching his fists, Cord kicked the ground, sending a tuft of dried grass flying. He muttered something that sounded like *damn electric fairy* then followed that up with, "Shit! Why?"

Tension thickened the air around them, explosive anger radiating from Cord. She could feel the hot, combustible energy emitting from his very soul, like a wounded dog about to attack him.

Rio shrugged, wiping away blood trickling from his lip. "Sorry, bud. But this is my place now."

Cord whipped around. "Sorry? What do you know about it?" Cord's eyes turned dead inside, his face agonized. "While I was fighting for this country's safety, this country took away the only home I ever had."

The sarcasm faded from Rio's gaze and regret took its place. "You're ex-military?"

Cord gave a quick nod, wiping his nose on his sleeve. His ragged shirt didn't look as if it could take any more abuse. "Army."

"Shit." Rio ran a hand over his reddened jaw, swelling now where he'd been hit.

Juli glanced at Rio then to Cord. She hoped they were done fighting, but she couldn't waste her one chance to get away. They both were so bruised and puffed up with male pride at the moment, neither was paying her a speck of attention. She couldn't let sudden sympathy for Cord or her long-standing weakness for Rio keep her at their mercy—either of them. Cord wasn't nearly as helpless as he looked and Rio...screw how she felt for Rio. He could go to hell.

No matter what, she couldn't let Rio discover the evidence stashed in her purse. Holding her breath, Juli meandered away as unobtrusively as she dared, letting them have their little man-to-man conversation.

If she could reach Rio's vehicle, she could escape. Had he left his keys inside? She could only hope. She'd been so stunned last night that she hadn't noticed losing her purse. But when she awoke moments ago on that god-awful dusty couch sans purse, finding it had been the only thing on her mind. Until stumbling across the two numbskulls knocking each other senseless.

First and foremost she had to protect the evidence. If Rio found it, he'd destroy it or turn it over to the authorities and her story would be dead in the water. Backing away, humming as if she didn't have a care in the world, Juli waited until she was several yards away before she turned and doubled back around the house, watching where she stepped. The black SUV wasn't far and thanks to the 5K she'd been training for, she reached it in record time.

She ran around to the side, away from the men and opened the door, searching the two front seats. Nothing. No keys in the ignition. No purse. No shoes either. "Crap!"

Going to the rear, she opened the back door and there it was—her cute little party purse lying forlornly on top of a thin metal sign. Strap broken, still too small to hold much more than her lipstick and those stupid, useless condom packets, it was nevertheless the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. Juli snagged her purse, revealing the words on the sign—Rio Grande Properties, Rio Tarin, Owner/Agent.

Real estate? Rio was selling real estate? Would wonders never cease? "Doesn't matter, Jules...find the damn evidence and get the heck out of Dodge!"

She searched her purse and there it was—in the minuscule side pocket—the watch that had broken at the award ceremony earlier last evening.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she glanced at the conversing men as she gripped the watch in her fist. They hadn't even noticed she was gone. She glanced back inside the

vehicle. Still no shoes... But what good would three-inch heels do her traipsing through the woods?

Clutching the watch in one hand, her purse in the other, she abandoned the search for her missing shoes and ducked behind the nearest tree.

## Chapter Five

"This isn't right, not at all, you damn motherfucker! You stole my home!"

No, it wasn't right. Rio watched as the muscles in Cord's face tightened, his skin flushing bright red from fury. Sweat beaded on his forehead, blood dripped from his nose.

Rio knew he didn't look any better, but he also knew competing in a pissing contest wouldn't help matters. Keeping his voice intentionally calm, he said, "You should have received notice."

Not that it justified a damn thing. Jesus, the guy looked as though he'd been through hell. So did this house. That's one reason Rio'd purchased it for a song. There was a lot of work ahead for the rightful owner. Legally, that was him. Ethically? He wasn't so sure...

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Rio fingered the keys he'd retrieved from under Juliana's car back at the station, and looked over the dilapidated plantation house and the rolling land surrounding it. His gaze returned to the two-story building dominating the flat plain where they stood. The aged, yellow clapboard was peeling and sorely needed a fresh coat of paint. A few of the ground-floor windows were busted. The stone chimneys were falling down, crumbled bricks littering the roof. The weeds that masqueraded as grass reached to his kneecaps and who knew when the gardens had last been tended, the place scrubbed down. From what he'd seen just now, the entire interior needed a complete overall. During his one cursory walk-through before bidding on the place, it hadn't seemed quite so...dilapidated.

Maybe it was the strain of stealing Juliana away from DC, maybe it was running into a former soldier, as battered on the inside as Rio was on the outside, but suddenly, looking at house and grounds, both in complete disarray, Rio realized what a major undertaking renovating the place would be. He wasn't sure his budget could support the investment, or that he had the time and interest to devote to the project.

The plantation was supposed to be a fairly quick turnaround for him. Buy it, fix it. Sell and profit. No harm, no foul.

But he suddenly realized that the two of them had been caught by unfortunate circumstance and if he followed through with his plans, he'd be as much as stealing the place from Cord Ramsey.

But what did he care?

Damn, his eye hurt. His lip didn't feel much better. "Kid, you've a hell of a mean right hook."

It wasn't his fault if crappy circumstances hit the former soldier. So why did he feel responsible? As though he were kicking a wounded man when he was down?

Even though the renovation work needed was extensive, the property was still a good asset. And wasn't everybody in business for one reason? To make a profit. He could simply opt to put the place on the market. Let someone else deal with the headache and hassle of restoration.

But it didn't sit right with him—the thought of selling Cord's home out from under him and making a quick buck.

At Cord's expense.

Dirty money, far as he was concerned.

The men who fought for their country should come home to glory, not ruin.

Rio had served in the Gulf War. Seen things no man should.

"Notice?" Cord said derisively, interrupting his thoughts. "Yeah well, I didn't. I imagine my grandfather may have, but seein' as how he passed away, it wouldn't have done much good. Damn his pride." Cord ran a hand over the scruffy, week-old shadow covering his jaw then turned his head to the side and spit. When he looked back at Rio, his eyes glittered with resentment. "Don't think I'm gonna just accept this."

"Maybe we can work something out..."

Rio let the idea dangle as he weighed his options.

Seizing a property from under a soldier's misfortune wasn't right. But taking advantage of his current situation? That was something any good Marine would do.

It'd be worth every penny if it kept Juliana out of trouble. He needed this guy to keep his mouth shut and what's more, he could use some help.

When he'd left last night, he hadn't thought things through. What about food? Supplies? The closing on his schedule tomorrow? No way could he miss that—it was a high-dollar sale, involving wealthy, repeat buyers he couldn't stand to lose.

Here he was, more than three hours from DC, without any gear or even a plan. He'd dug himself in deeper than he could handle. Alone.

Maybe he was crazy for thinking to involve a stranger, but there was something about Cord... Maybe the fact they were both ex-military, maybe just the look in the other man's eyes—despair tempered with hope. Maybe the way Cord had stuck up for Juliana so furiously. But Rio sensed that at any other time, the two of them would be on the same side.

Having little choice at the moment if he was going to keep Juliana safe, he followed his gut. He could always change his mind later if Cord proved unworthy of the trust he was about to extend. "I've a proposition for you."

Cord shook his head, making an animalistic sound. "Forget it, asshole. I don't give a shit whose property I'm standing on, I'm not letting you hurt her anymore."

"It's not like that." Rio's stomach knotted at the thought of anyone thinking he'd harm Juliana. "I'd never hurt her. Not on my life."



No one else would hurt her either. Ever. Not if he could help it.

"Oh?" Cord's eyes narrowed, filled with suspicion. "Then what is it like?"

"I'm protecting her."

Cord scoffed. "Yeah. Sure. Looks like it from where I'm standin'."

*Por Dios!* Rio was tempted to hit him again. Instead, he cleared his throat. "For God's sake, there's no sense in us beating the hell out of each other any more than we already have. It won't solve a thing." With two fingers, Rio tested the side of his torso and he didn't have to fake his wince. "I don't think you cracked any ribs—not yet, and I'd just as soon keep all my bones in place."

"Oh?" Cord shrugged his shoulders and bounced on the balls of his feet like a middleweight champ about to strike. "Well, I'm not so sure *I've* had enough."

"Come on, kid. You're a match for me. I admit it. Physically, a fight between us could go on until we both pass out."

"Quit calling me kid. I'm almost twenty-six and I feel about six decades older."

"Fair enough. I've only got a dozen years on you, but they've been hard-fought just as I suspect yours have. Now listen..." Rio paused to make sure Cord was paying attention. He respected the younger man for his resolve, his moral fiber, calling him out as he had.

And could he really blame Cord for being suspicious? Juliana did look like hell right now, as if someone had attacked her.

She'd look a lot worse dead though.

That's what Cord didn't understand.

"I'm going to level with you. She has a hit on her by a major drug ring," Rio informed him. "Now I'll admit to tying her up and kidnapping her, but it's for her safety."

Cord shook his head, disbelieving. "And her missing underwear?" he questioned in a barely controlled voice. "Torn dress? The rope burns on her wrists?"

Rio could see Cord was never going to believe *him*. "Ask her then. She'll tell you. Juliana!"

"A hit?" Cord said with a derisive lift of one eyebrow. "What is this? Some damn flick on that women's network?"

"Juliana!" Rio turned around. No feisty female in a sexy black dress presented herself. Where the hell was she?

*Shit!*

"Juliana!" His eyes scanned the area surrounding the house for movement. Through the sparse trees and high weeds, he spotted her making a run for it. Fleeing over a small knoll toward the thick woods that covered the eastern section of the property, there went the newfound bane of his existence and the missing corroborator of his story.

What in the hell was she thinking?

"Dammit!" Rio took off after her. "Juliana!"

To his surprise, Cord followed. Rio couldn't be certain if Cord was chasing him down or Juliana, and he wasn't stopping to find out. The woman had long legs and she knew how to use them.

He might have kept his muscles in prime condition, but the injuries from the plane wreck made running difficult. His gait was uneven, much slower than it should have been. He'd be lucky if he caught her.

Cord easily propelled past him, his strong legs making short work covering the rolling landscape.

Rio could see that Cord would reach Juliana in no time. Reluctantly, he slowed to a halt, left leg burning, somehow confident that Cord wasn't going to let Juliana get away. He was too hell-bent on protecting her.

Now if only she'd tell the truth.

"Damn woman." He should have kept her tied up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once she'd been spotted, Juli ran for all she was worth, despite the sticks and rocks gouging into her bare feet. She heard both men shouting her name, but only gripped her purse and ran faster. If she could just make it to the road, flag down a passing driver —

"Hey!" Cord hollered, louder than before.

Knowing he was closing in lent wings to her feet. She ran like a jackrabbit, dodging between trees, around fallen logs, surprised by the feeling of elation that took hold of her knowing she was being chased by two men. She knew Rio wouldn't let her come to harm, but she was still pissed at not being given a choice back in DC. It would serve him right if she did escape and have him arrested for kidnapping. That'd teach him to ignore her! Lie to her...

"Lady, hey! Juli!" Cord called in that sexy drawl of his from only a few feet behind her. "Darlin', don't make me tackle you."

Her feet flew over dead leaves then suddenly snagged, causing her to lurch sideways. "Dammit!"

Her mouth just grew dirtier with every hour that passed as Rio's captive, didn't it?

"I mean it!" he called, coming up beside her, arms spread as if he really would tackle her if she didn't stop.

Knowing it was only a matter of time before she sprained an ankle on the uneven terrain, Juli slowed to a halt and bent double, fisted hands braced on her knees, still clutching their precious burdens. She looked up at him through the sticky mass her hair had become.

"What?" she gasped, out of breath. "Why'd you...stop me? You...don't want me here...any more than I..."

His eyes zeroed in on her, full of questions. "If what he says is true about thugs bein' after you..."

Great. So Rio had told him. Now she had not one but two men determined to keep her from doing her job. Juli let out an exasperated sigh and straightened. "Doesn't matter. I'm a big girl."

"Yeah well, I don't know how long a big girl like you can run." Cord nodded toward the thickest part of the woods. "Main road's that way, but there's nothing in that direction except branches and sticker bushes for miles." He stepped forward and she saw a softening in his features as his lips spread in a true smile, hampered when he grimaced in pain. "Stay with me. I'll protect you."

"Here? From what I can tell, you don't exactly have a secure hold on this place yourself." And if there was one thing Juli craved in her life, it was security.

"Don't you know possession is nine-tenths? I'm not going anywhere, not until this mess is straightened out. Likely not even then. This is my home." Cord paused, his attention caught, and Juli glanced over her shoulder to see Rio topping the rise behind them. He walked with a barely perceptible limp, but tension was evident in every step, even from twenty yards away.

Cord moved closer and lowered his voice. "I mean it. Whatever trouble you've got brewin' back home—or with your guard dog there—you can stay here with me. I'll protect you from Rio. Still have more than a bit of fight left in me."

He flexed his arms and Juli laughed. She'd already noticed how attractive Cord was, but now that she wasn't running from him or watching the two morons pummel each other, she was able to really appreciate Cord's bruised but handsome exterior. More than that, to notice how he was looking at her, charming her with his smile, as if to prove *he* would never ignore her for ten long years. Based on the heat shining from his gaze, he hadn't missed the amount of skin exposed by her dress either. His gallant attention was a balm to her wounded sensibilities.

"Thank you. That's awfully sweet but not necessary." She couldn't help her smile. She'd known Cord all of ten minutes but already she was certain he was one of the good guys, scraggly appearance and all. "I appreciate your concern, truly, but I don't need it. Rio won't hurt me."

"Okay." Cord nodded slowly as if he didn't fully believe her, hovering protectively. "That's good to know. What's that you're holding?"

Juli's heart skipped a beat. "Just my purse."

He gestured toward her opposite hand. "No. That."

She shrugged, going for captured-escapee blasé. "Oh this? Just my watch. It broke earlier."

Juli heard a noise as she finished her cursory explanation and turned. Rio had come up behind her, his posture stiff, eyes burning with jealousy. So it bothered him, the idea that she might lean on Cord?

Tough shit. He'd let her believe he was dead for a decade. She didn't owe him a damn thing.

Cord shifted, stepping between them and Juli bit her lip to keep from gloating. She kind of liked being treated like their prize T-bone.

A bird trilled overhead as if asking, "Whoo, whoo, whoo?"

Juli's awareness wavered between the two men...and her sore feet. Now that she'd stopped running, she realized how foolish her actions had been. She'd rather concentrate on the men.

Cord, with the haunted eyes, down-home manners and friendly smile, who stood in front of her as if offering his strength to defend her. Rio, glaring bullets at her, taut muscled, tense with the strain of what...? Upset because he couldn't catch up with her? Mad because she'd run?

So what did she do now? Make another escape attempt? Wait for night and brave the woods then? Bide her time staying put?

Accept Rio's protection?

Or Cord's?

Juli felt cornered, as though her rights had been stripped, her independence ripped away. Had Rio been considerate enough to come talk to her, to tell her the problem...to *face her*! But he hadn't.

Angry at the whole damn situation, she reached over and took Cord's hand and held it, gazing up at him. "I need to use your phone, pretty please."

"I'm sorry, but I don't have one." He pulled her close and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Beneath the dirt and dried blood, she idly noticed how good he smelled, like fresh-cut wood. "We'll work this out though. Somehow."

Right. As if Rio would be willing to see reason. Not likely. Determined to do what he thought best, Rio was a man of action, not contemplation. A man who clearly still saw her as a helpless girl—despite what had happened between them last night. He may have licked her pussy but that didn't give him the right to boss her around.

Sensing her doubt, Cord released her hand and lifted her chin. "We will. That's a promise. You can trust me."

She stared into the depths of his eyes, falling into the fathomless pain she glimpsed before he blinked it away. Juli sensed his need, his desperation. And though she suspected it had more to do with losing his home than anything else, at the moment it was directed straight at her.

His thumb caressed her shoulder and her nerves tingled, a strange feeling rolling through her body, going straight to her heart—indescribable and unexplainable. The

temptation to stand on her tiptoes and hug him back, to kiss him all over, anything to ease his sadness, seized hold of her.

"I'll even fix your watch, darlin'."

Stuffing the watch deep in her purse, more because she wanted a moment to think than because she was afraid he'd take it from her, Juli replied, "Thanks, but that's not necessary. But the other..." She looked at Rio and felt such a confusing mix of emotions that she automatically leaned into Cord.

Who smiled broadly.

"I don't know why..." Juli nestled against his hard torso, amazed at how good, how *right* his embrace felt. Not at all awkward. "But I do trust you." She stared at Rio and finished, practically daring him to argue. "So I'll stay. For now."

Envy? Lust?

The desire to rip the pretty-boy head off Cord's neck?

Unspeakable feelings raged through Rio as he watched the man, who for all intents and purposes was a complete stranger, guide Juliana back to the plantation, his muscled arm holding her snug against his side. Practically embracing her, for God's sake.

He watched them walk away, chatting like old friends. Listened to Juliana's laughter. Remembered the look in her eyes when she accepted Cord's "protection".

Maybe he should rip Cord's twelve-year-younger dick off instead.

Rio bit his lip against the urge to call out, to draw her attention back to himself and away from the other man.

*Jesus.* The expression on Juliana's face when she took Cord's hand—he'd seen it one other time.

Last night. When she'd looked at him, full of longing—for *him*. Glazed with hunger, passion...deep sexual desire. His cock jerked as visions plagued his mind, the emotions that had crossed her beautiful face as she'd sucked him off, the way her lips molded around his shaft, the way she'd moaned...

She'd made him so damn hard.

And he was getting hard now.

Why the hell *wasn't* he ripping Cord's arms off? Poking his eyes out?

Rio shifted his stance, hoping to ease the sudden erection straining against his fly.

There was no describing the odd feeling in his gut, the way his heart stuttered at the sight of Juliana curled against Cord as if she belonged there. As though she wanted to be there.

He ought to protest, to throw the damn woman over his shoulder like a caveman, drag her off into the woods and fuck her silly. No, fuck her *silent*. That'd save her rebellious neck.

But for some odd reason, he didn't want to. Didn't want to interrupt their peaceful interlude. At least she was no longer arguing with him or trying to run away. She was content in Cord's arms, and as long as she was happy, so was he. To a point.

Questioning whether she'd sucked away his common sense along with his dick, he followed behind them, listening to Cord ramble on about how he'd never seen a woman with such speed. Such legs.

Juliana laughed, sounding like a damn giddy schoolgirl. "If I'd had proper shoes, I bet you wouldn't have caught me. Next time you won't."

Rio looked at her feet. Bare. Scratched. Damn fool woman.

"You think not? Darlin', what makes you think I'm gonna let there be a next time?" For the first time since he'd confronted Rio, Cord was grinning in this asinine, lighthearted way.

What happened to the war-torn soldier who'd just lost his home? In his place laughed a carefree youngster. Hell, Cord was almost acting like a teenager. On a date.

Shit. Was the bastard actually flirting with her?

Was Juliana flirting back?

Rio cleared his throat. Whirling around, Juliana arched an eyebrow.

"You wanted something?" Barely giving him time to think of a response, she shot off, "I thought not." Then she turned back to Cord and said something else. Touched his shoulder.

That stung.

Damn. She was definitely flirting back.

Probably because she was still mad at him. That made sense. She was just angry, trying to get to him. And it wouldn't work.

Nope. Turns out he didn't mind her hanging all over Cord one bit.

But he didn't like her ignoring him either.

Rio told the pain in his left side to shut up and like a cat catching a mouse, loped forward and pounced, snatching her purse from her grasp.

"Hey!" she cried. "Give that back!"

It was his turn to arch a brow. "When I'm good and ready."

Being so much taller than Juliana, it was easy for Rio to hold the tiny bag over her head, flip it open and rummage through the interior. A tube of lipstick, that busted bracelet Cord had cooed all over about fixing and...condoms. Several. *That's* what she'd been after?

Didn't make sense.

And just how much was she sleeping around? And why did he not care as long as she would sleep with him?

"Come on, children, we'll talk inside." Having reached the back porch, Cord took the steps two at a time and opened the screen door, ushering them inside like any good host.

Rio stifled a growl and went on alert the moment he walked into the kitchen. It was a nightmare, straight out of the drug-induced seventies—old, golden yellow appliances, heavy walnut cabinets. Orange walls. Peeling, yellow vinyl floor.

The place was a designer's nightmare. And it reeked of fish.

A wooden block in one corner of the counter housed a couple of kitchen knives and propped up a disreputable-looking cookbook. A cast-iron frying pan sat atop the stove. But he didn't see any weapons. Nothing suspicious. Nothing that made him doubt Cord was anything other than what he claimed—a down-on-his-luck soldier with rotten timing. And an ability to flirt.

At this point, though it galled him to admit it, he trusted Cord, a complete stranger camped out in his house, more than he trusted Juliana.

"Catch." He tossed Juliana her purse. "So just what are you hiding, *ángelita*?"

"Nothing," she answered stiffly. "I couldn't very well get home without money."

"There's no money in there. Not even your license."

"Oh." Her jaw dropped. "I thought..."

"What? Planning to use those condoms to bribe some passing trucker?"

"You—"

"Save it." Rio smiled grimly. "Either tell the truth or don't talk at all, *darlin'*. The rooms upstairs have locks on the doors?" he asked Cord.

"You're not locking her up!" Cord spun to level a glare at Rio, his spine ramrod straight. "I'll look after her."

*Yeah, I'll bet.* Time to play hardball. "Hey, *pinche niño*, you disagree with what I'm doing in my own home, you can get the hell off my property."

"Fine. If that's the way you want to play this." Cord reached out, pulling Juliana back into his embrace and crisscrossing his arms in front of her. At the possessive treatment, nary a word passed her lips. All she did was smile innocently. "Yeah, there're some rooms that lock. I'll take her up."

"No need." Rio took Juliana by the arm, tugging her from Cord's loose hold before she had time to settle in. "You wait down here. I'll get her taken care of then come back down and we'll talk. Give me a reason to trust you and maybe I'll give you your house back."

Cord raised his hands in the air, as if willingly releasing her. But his words weren't so casual. "If she yells just once, I'll be up there before your heart beats twice. And when I'm finished, you won't be fit to negotiate, if you get my drift."

"Don't you just love macho men?" Juliana asked no one in particular.

## Chapter Six

"Stifle it." Taking her by the arm, Rio led her resisting form up the narrow stairs.

"Well, what do you know," he commented at the first bedroom he came to, fingering the old-fashioned metal doorplate, complete with keyhole—and key. "Appears we've stepped into *The Twilight Zone*." Zone of good fortune, for once.

"You can't do this!" she protested when he shoved her inside.

"I can and I am." Releasing her arm, he twisted the old key, heard the satisfying click then pocketed it to give to the man downstairs. Rio turned to find himself facing one cranky, complaining woman.

"This is medieval! You can't lock me up!"

Her useless objections didn't bother him nearly as much as the color of this room.

Snot-green. God. The realtor in him wanted to find another. The man in him just wanted to throw her on the bed and claim her.

He barely spared a glance for the faded wallpaper or the scratched hardwood floor. Being on the second story she couldn't jump out the window without risking a broken bone and he didn't see Juliana tying sheets together. It wasn't her style—she might break a nail.

*But she did come at you with that tire iron...*

Despite the intrusive thought, Rio glanced out the window, confirming the drop was a straight one. No lattice. No porch roof. Just a good fifteen, twenty feet of falling.

Muting a groan when he noticed the rotting window ledge, Rio abandoned that concern. The fireplace looked to be in working order, but he didn't care about that either. All that mattered was that the room appeared secure enough for his immediate purpose—keeping her safe.

A board creaked under his foot. Jesus, this house was a disaster. If he kept it, the repairs would cost a fortune. If Cord cooperated and he deeded the property back over, Cord would be doing him a favor.

"Are you listening to me?" she screeched. "You can't do this!"

"I just did and I'll do it again if it means saving your life." Guiding Juliana to the large bed centered on one wall, he pushed her reluctant body down.

With a cry of protest, she plopped on the edge of the mattress and crossed her legs.

"Scream a little louder, why don't you? Are you trying to get my ass kicked?"

"No. If I wanted that, I would have lied to him earlier and told him that you *did* want to hurt me." Juliana folded her arms, fuming. The action plumped her breasts together which the miniscule party dress did nothing to hide.



Rio's cock responded. She was so furiously independent it was a turn-on.

He couldn't decide whether to spank her or kiss those luscious mounds so temptingly displayed.

"This is ridiculous. You can't keep me here forever." Her blue eyes glittered like the night, sparking off his fantasies.

Did she know what she was doing to him when her tongue darted out and ran over her lips, stoking his desire? Ten to one, she did.

"You want me, you take me," she said with a toss of her head. That little comment had his brain – and his dick – going in all sorts of directions until she kept on, bringing him back to the present and the realization that he was facing one pissed-off, slightly hungover reporter. *Ex-reporter*, if he had his way.

"You don't ask, you don't discuss, you just assume. Assume you know everything, including what's best for me. Don't you care about how I feel at all?"

Her mouth was wet as she gazed at him, reminding him of the way she'd just flirted with Cord. Of the way she'd smiled at him hours ago with her mouth wrapped around *his* shaft.

"You didn't seem so concerned about going home last night. You weren't haranguing me about lengthy explanations then." Bracing her legs apart, he sank to his knees between them, splaying his hands on her thighs to hold her open.

"In fact, you seemed pretty eager to please me." His nostrils flared. He could smell her, smell the way she wanted him...or wanted Cord?

"Don't mock me." But she didn't try to close her legs.

"Don't be so difficult." His fingers pressed into her bare flesh, squeezing. "I saw the way you were looking at him."

"So what?"

"So don't forget what you told me last night." He brought his lips to the inside of her leg, kissing gently. "It's me you've always wanted."

She made a tiny noise but she didn't stop him. Sweeping his mouth upward, he nibbled along her inner thigh.

"I've changed my mind. I don't want a bossy asshole." Her legs twitched beneath his lips. "That's you – in case you were curious."

"Oh baby..." Rio kissed higher, edging his mouth over her abdomen, flirting with the trimmed bush that covered her mons. "Asshole or not, I know how to admire a woman, especially one who wants me so bad it appears her panties have plum disappeared."

"You would remind me," she grumped, arching toward his mouth.

"Convenient, wouldn't you say?" Rio brushed his lips over her glistening labia and groaned.

"Are you really going to give him his property back?"

How could she ask that at a time like this? Ignoring her question, Rio pushed her to the center of the mattress and spread her pussy open, dipping his tongue inside. Her taste coated his tongue as he French-kissed her cunt, gathering her essence into his mouth.

Pulling free, he climbed over her until their mouths met, wincing once his sore lip connected with hers. Gentling his touch, he licked the lush flesh of her parted lips, dipping his tongue in between then withdrawing. Then he did it again, going farther inside this time, sliding his tongue against hers.

She whimpered as he pulled back and knotted his fingers in her hair, forcing her to look at him. "Taste that? That's how much you want me, Juliana." His body slid slowly over hers until his feet met the floor. "Me. Don't forget that."

He stood, his cock pulsing with need for her but knowing he couldn't take her this way. He wasn't willing to.

With any other woman he might have taken advantage of his erection. Gone in for a quick fuck and satisfying release. With Juliana it was different. He didn't want to take advantage of her. To dominate her. He wanted to love her.

When they had all the time in the world.

Right now she was angry with him. When she cooled down, he was confident she'd come to him. *She'd ravish him.*

"I haven't forgotten in ten years." She rolled to her side and brought her knees up, staring blankly out the dirty window.

"Thought maybe you needed a reminder." One hand on the doorknob, one hand on the key, he looked back, absorbing her into his soul. "Stay here, Juliana. Don't defy me on this. It's for your own protection. I'll return as soon as I can and we'll explore what's between us."

"You'll return, huh?" she said flatly. "Just like you did the last time?"

\* \* \* \* \*

*What was going on up there?*

Uncertainty tore at Cord's mind, pounded through his veins. Standing at the bottom of the staircase, he waited. Fought the urge to run upstairs and see what was happening.

His gut told him Rio was a trustworthy guy. That he wouldn't hurt Juli.

But he'd seen the way Rio looked at her. He wanted her.

The same way Cord wanted her.

Despite her busted-up appearance—bruised wrists, torn dress—she was a gorgeous woman. A knockout. When she looked at him and her lips curved in that brilliant, wide smile, he felt his heart catch then thump swiftly. In a good way for once.

Excitement—something he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Every glance from her sky-blue eyes, so filled with life and spunk, every glimpse of her long, shapely body moving effortlessly to the beat of temptation...well, she made him long to be happy, to be *right* again.

Cord grasped his upper arm and rubbed the spot where she'd touched him. So casually, so tenderly. He needed that.

Softness. Hadn't had a lick of it in his life for three tours now.

He wanted her. All of her. Her softness, her *joy de vous*, or whatever the hell it was called.

He wanted her body.

Of course, it didn't help that her underwear was MIA and he hadn't had a woman in ages. Cord was hungry, and each time he looked at her, he could just imagine being fully satisfied—the hot, sweaty way their bodies would join. Holding her in his arms as he took her, fast and hard. Feeling her pussy wrapped tight around him, convulsing as she came.

His own release.

With a groan, Cord jerked himself from the fantasy before he became so far gone he jerked himself off. Last thing he needed right now was his pecker puttin' in for a dishonorable discharge. He leaned against the wall, his cock standing at attention. *Shit*.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the platform overhead. Rio was on his way down and, if something didn't change quick, he'd see exactly what was goin' on in Cord's mind. Not acceptable.

Needing something to distract himself, Cord hightailed it into the kitchen and grabbed a knife from the cutting block. He retrieved the fish from the sink, rinsed it thoroughly then went out the kitchen door, letting it slam behind him. Plopping the fish on the makeshift cutting block, he started cleaning the scales from the trout's silver exterior.

A moment later Rio stood in the doorway, staring out at him through the screen. "Breakfast? Or lunch?"

"Both. Every day for the past four."

"You have it pretty rough here."

"Seems like it just became a whole lot rougher too." Cord worked in quick, staccato movements, flipping the fish over when he'd finished with one side.

"What about game?"

"Can't stand the thought of picking up a gun, so fish it is." Hell, considering the flashback from earlier, he could barely handle a fishing pole. Could've poked his eye out the way he'd been swinging that damn thing around.

Rio stepped onto the porch, hands in his pockets as he took in the ramshackle outbuildings in the backyard. Cord followed his gaze, curious what Rio thought of the place when he surveyed the old smokehouse, cook shack, wellhouse, and in the

distance, two large barns. Everything needed repairs, at the very least a fresh coat of paint. But why should he care? They weren't his to tend to now.

Why the hell hadn't Grandpop used the money he'd sent? For that matter, what in the hell had he done with it?

All those years Cord spent fighting for what he believed was right, for his family...  
And for what?

Nothing. He had nothing left to fight for.

"I served myself, in the Persian Gulf. Marines." Rio cleared his throat, turning around. Their eyes met. "Being military isn't easy. Neither is what you come home to, most times."

Cord gave a short nod. "That where you earned those nasty scars?"

At the question, Rio shifted, camouflaging his left side and Cord thought the other man wasn't going to answer.

Rio surprised him. "No. I owe this to a senseless civilian tragedy. Can't even claim I was fighting for a cause, justified or not." There was no mistaking the pain that filled Rio's voice at the memory. "We all have our scars, Cord. Some we can see, some we can't."

Cord nodded once in agreement. He felt as though he was bleeding inside. Dying.

Except when he thought about carefree blue eyes and a wide mouth just created go down on a man.

As if sensing the conflicting thoughts, Rio's eyes narrowed, his lips flattened as he stared at Cord. Somehow, it seemed Rio could see right through him, see his pain, ignore his interest in the woman upstairs. "I take it you're still licking your wounds, but they'll heal. The important thing is you don't ignore them. Knew a Marine who did that once—erupted like a damn bomb after a couple months." Rio stepped closer and spoke sincerely. "I respect you, Cord. It isn't hard to tell you're a decent man and I don't intend to rob you of the last thing you've got."

Cord looked down, gutting the fish, not sure what to make of the conversation. Or Rio. "The catch?"

"There's always one of those, isn't there?"

Cord shrugged, separating the fish entrails from the meat. "Seems to be the story of my life." Setting the knife down, he wiped his hands on his jeans, not giving a crap if they got dirty. They were stained anyway—everything was. When Rio remained silent, he faced him. "So what is it? The catch? I'm tellin' you, I won't do anything illegal."

"It's nothing like that. Listen up—I'm laying this on the line. I need your help. That woman upstairs—she has a lot of spunk, she's smart, too damn smart for her own good. Juliana's in serious danger, but she doesn't want to face the truth of that. I just want to see her out of harm's way. And right now that's here."

"Your property, your right." Cord blinked, fighting the urge to look away. The whole thing was shit. Absolute bullshit. "It's your damn house now, isn't it? Unless I

decide to stick a hook through your lip and slice your gullet, guess I don't have a say in anything you do."

Finished with his task, Cord curved a finger in the trout's mouth, carrying it as he walked back into the house. The screen door banged shut behind him. Two seconds later, Rio opened it and followed him inside.

"As if I'd stand still and let you. You want to hear my condition or not?"

Throwing the gutted fish in the sink, Cord turned and rested his butt against the counter, arms crossed negligently. "Fine. Talk."

"I didn't think things through when I nabbed her and drove out here. I heard she was in trouble and acted on instinct. I realize now that we'll need supplies I neglected to bring. On top of that, I have some personal business I need to attend to. It'll take me a couple days."

"What are you saying? You want me to babysit her?"

"Yes." Rio rubbed a hand over his face, flinching when he touched his swelling eye. Unwillingly, Cord sensed the exhaustion Rio refused to show. Sensing it and emphasized. Physical exhaustion had nothing on mental.

"I need to keep her here until it's safe for her to return to DC. You help me out, make sure she doesn't leave, and when this is all over, I'll sign the property back over to you."

"It's that simple?" Cord raised a brow. "Sounds too easy." A few days alone with a beautiful woman and he'd have his property back in his possession? In his dreams.

"Simple?" Rio laughed wryly. "If you think keeping her here will be a walk in the park, you got another think coming. She won't admit to the danger she's in, but it's real."

Cord couldn't help his smile. "She sure can run." And damn, she had sexy legs. Legs he wanted wrapped around him.

Cord wiped his jaw, smelling leftover fish. He needed a shave. He needed to get laid. More than either, he needed his home back. "I don't really have a choice, do I? But I need to know..."

Before he agreed, there was one last aspect he had to consider. One question he had to have the answer to. He raised his eyes, meeting Rio's gaze squarely. "She your girl?"

"I..." Rio looked away. "We...have a past but..."

"Is she or isn't she?"

"Take a good look." Rio spread his arms wide, turning so that his scarred side faced Cord. "Like someone of Juliana's caliber would settle for this."

It was the first sign of insecurity he'd seen in the other man. "You don't think very highly of her, do you?"

"Yeah. I do. Too highly, I think." Rio gave a harsh bark of laughter. "That's the problem."

"So she's fair game?"

"I don't see a ring on her finger." Rio seemed to be strangling on the words. But he said 'em. "Do you?"

Cord laughed wryly. "Don't worry about me there. I'm not about to put a shackle on myself or any woman. Not for a long, long time."

Sleeping with 'em? Now that was altogether different. And wasn't pleasing a woman in bed the surest way to gain her cooperation? Please her sexually, mold her will to his own?

Wishful thinking or not, Cord couldn't wait to test the theory. "I'll keep her here. Guaranteed. Do what you need to. When you get back, I promise Juli will be here, safe and sound."

*And in my bed, if I have anything to say about it.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Juli fingered her watch, damning the broken clasp but thankful Rio hadn't noticed the flash drive it contained when he rifled through her purse. That was about the only thing she had to be thankful for.

Her head ached.

Her stomach growled.

She felt like a rat in a cage. Trapped. Without the cheese.

No cheese pizza either. And no cock.

*Damn him!* Working her up then leaving—again. Which seemed to be the story of her life where Rio was concerned.

God, she felt agitated. As though her skin were crawling from the inside out.

She shoved the watch under the pillow then changed her mind and rolled from the bed to lift the corner of the mattress and stuff it deep between that and the bedsprings.

Evidence stashed for the moment, she went to the door and gave the knob a wiggle. Then a kick. Definitely locked, but it was ancient. Maybe if she found a hairpin or something. A crowbar. A tomahawk.

At the moment, if she had a hand grenade, she'd probably use it.

Pacing the bedroom, Juli fumed, hungry, horny and more than a little hungover.

Male conversation and the occasional chuckle drifted through the crack beneath the door. Winding its way from downstairs, the deep timbres of their voices mocked her. From the sound of it, Cord and Rio were becoming bosom buddies. Just great.

How could Rio leave her like this? If she hadn't been so dazed by passion, she wouldn't have just lay there in a lust-induced trance while he backed away and locked the door.

A reminder? Ha!

Even now she could still taste it. The salty essence of her desire for Rio had sealed itself to the skin of her lips. To her tongue.

Want him she might, but put up with him waxing hot and cold? She refused. Rio was tearing her heart in two and she had to get the hell of out here...wherever the hell here was. Come to think on it, her head was also splitting in two and she might as well lay the blame for that at his doorstep.

Her reporter instincts kicked in. This bedroom looked lived in, a bit more than the barren living room she'd glimpsed below. There had to be something...she didn't know what, but *something* she could use to escape. To pry the door open. Maybe to deaden the pain in her skull. Erase his taste from her lips.

Without any other options at the moment, Juli began to explore the room, starting with the dresser. She rummaged through each drawer and hit the jackpot when she reached the top. Stashed in the back corner, an old bottle of aspirin exposed itself to her searching. The expiration date had rubbed off, but the remaining pills beckoned.

Cursing Rio with every second that passed, Juli gathered what spit she could, flipped the cap and downed three of the chalky tablets. "Bleck!"

There. Take that, Rio Tarin! Even half dressed and half aroused she could rough it with the best of them, purge him and his sexy —

*Escape, Jules. Escape.* Right. Determined not to waste another thought on the unthoughtful jerk, Juli finished hunting through the top drawers, but didn't find anything else useful in the dresser.

She moved on to the nightstand, which was mostly a dusty collection of pennies and pens plus a couple of action novels from the nineties. Not even a lighter. She couldn't even set the books on fire and smoke her way out.

Time for the closet. Musty clothes hung haphazardly on wire hangers and she pushed them aside. In the corner, she found a flimsy cardboard box almost disintegrated and stinking of mice poop. Disgusting. Forcing herself to ignore the smell and threat of live rodents, she kept digging and spied an army green duffel bag.

*Bingo!* She pulled it toward her. It was partially open as if it'd just been dropped there, exposing a hint of its meager contents.

She bit her lip, glancing at the door. She was being a snoop, but something about the duffel called to her. If he was going to be Rio's cohort in crime, then she'd lump the two of them together and resent Cord's uninvited presence into her life at the moment too.

Rational or not, Juli suddenly realized that men were only good for two things — changing the oil when the orange light came on and opening lids screwed too tightly on jars. She wouldn't even add sex to the list because any good glass dildo was better than being caught with a married man.

So nothing — no remnant of guilt or shred of respect — would keep her from taking what she wanted. Which, other than out of here, was satisfying her curiosity. And

wouldn't it be nice if she found something she could use to aid her escape? A hammer, a jackknife, anything that would get that damn door unlocked. *A weapon...*

She could just imagine herself hijacking Rio's SUV at gunpoint and leaving his butt here. *Ha!*

She tugged the duffel's zipper all the way open. On top sat a pair of dog tags, confirming that *Ramsey, Cordell, O Pos, No Religious Pref* was the owner; underneath, a small pile of neatly fold Army-issue clothing.

Curious beyond belief, something drove her to discover more about Cord. What made him tick? Why did he seem familiar? Juli pushed the clothes aside, scrounging the bottom. Her fingers encountered a couple of small boxes and she pulled them free.

The first was a box of Red Hots. She hadn't thought of the old-fashioned spicy candy in twenty years, not since... Not since her dad took her to see some movie about a fairytale princess. God, that'd been so long ago—well before she started thinking being seen with her parents was *uncool*.

Pushing away the maudlin memory, she quickly glanced at the next item, praying for chocolate but no...

An unopened box of rubbers.

Smiling indulgently, she stuffed them back inside and kept searching then bumped into something solid. Bringing it into the light revealed a thick, leather-bound book. Guilt assailed her, but she flipped open the front cover anyway.

Inscribed in nearly illegible writing on the first page were the words—*Save your memories for when you're my age, Cordell. They'll seem all the more precious with each year that passes. Love, Nana*

Juli smiled at the personal note and thumbed through the first few pages, her eyes scanning over innocent journal entries of a teenager.

A crush on a teacher.

A fight with his grandparents.

Complaints over chores.

*And what was that?* She backtracked a few pages.

Sex dreams!

Juli laughed, knowing she shouldn't be spying but too intrigued to stop.

She turned another page and the date jumped significantly, by several years.

*So shit happens, huh? People back home have no clue. Thought I'd see the world, boost finances for the folks back home, maybe go to college later on...learn about modern farming. But Nana is dead, Grandpop doesn't write and my life sucks.*

*Congratulate me though—I've learned not to jump at the sound of gunshots, not to piss—or even flinch—as bullets whiz past my face. Here, even dogs and cats are bombs, and the quietest moment can explode into bloodshed without a second's warning.*



*Death surrounds me. Some folks think we're here rebuilding Iraq, handing out hand-ups. Not in any true danger. They're disillusioned. This is real war.*

*I swear to God, when this is over and I'm back home, I'll never harm another human being as long as I live.*

*Will I even make it home?*

*Do I care?*

Breathless, Juli flipped to the next page.

*Read over that last entry. I'm becoming maudlin, aren't I? Depressed, the staff shrink says. Wonder the hell why? Everything that surrounds us is dirty and dusty. Cold, empty, emotionless. Decided to stop reading letters from back home. It's easier not to miss something when you aren't thinking about it. Some sweet thing from Georgia had started writing – as if I was her goddamned pen pal or something. Hell, send me a nicotine-free cigarette, a year's subscription to some nudie mag, something I can fucking use to take my mind off DEATH!!!!!!*

And another, dated a few months later.

*Realized why we're here today. We are making a difference. We ARE helping. Here's what happened –*

*A young Shi'ite boy shook my hand today and thanked me.*

*Out of the blue! He just walked over and shook my hand, smiling. Said "Thank you" in broken English. Didn't say what for, just thanked me. He couldn't have been more than seven, yet I knew from the look in his eyes he was damn sincere. And smart. Keener than most adults here. Hell, anywhere. For once, I almost felt like a hero and not a gun-wielding murderer. I hope that kid becomes president of Iraq one day. We need someone like him to make this place right.*

Juli's fingers shook as she turned one more page.

*Killed my sarge today...*

Footsteps sounded on the stairs and Juli slammed the book shut, quickly stuffing it back in the bag. She practically leapt to the bed, feigning sleep, her heart in her throat. She was tortured by the pain exposed by his writing. Now she knew why Cord looked so haunted. And she was desperate to learn more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not even 8:00 a.m. and already Rio had kidnapped a woman, crossed state lines – did that make it more of a felony than it already was? – been accused of rape, partook in a fistfight, licked Juliana's pussy – twice! – *and* received a blowjob.

One he couldn't quit thinking about or reliving in his mind.

Was this a great country or what?

And had he completely lost his marbles to be grinning as he was? Tooling down the dirt drive toward the main road, Rio could barely take in all that had happened. Neither could he believe he'd just left Juliana with a total stranger.

His stomach dipped at that thought, semi-hard cock wilted.

How in the world could he do that? Leave her here, stranded? *With a stranger?*

For all he knew, Cord was lying about his background and history. The guy could be a professional scam artist or a serial killer, plotting his next move...

Yeah, right. Because so many of those were stranded out in the sticks, practically starving yet willing to attack a man with a good fifty pounds on them to save a damsel in distress.

Rio slowed when a rabbit bounded across the lane. The gears in his mind might be sluggish after an entire night without sleep, but he vaguely remembered seeing the name "Ramsey" on some of the paperwork pertaining to the purchase of the plantation, so okay, Cord was on the up-and-up about that.

But what about the rest? Had Rio just doomed Juliana to a situation worse than the Benitos? His gut said no, but his mind needed more than that.

Just before he hit pavement, Rio put his SUV in park and fished his phone from the glove box where he'd stashed it prior to snatching Juliana. He punched in the speed dial for his office and waited for Lorraine to answer. She was always up with the roosters and he figured today wouldn't be any different. Impatient, now that he was second-guessing himself, Rio drummed his fingers on the wheel and waited.

"Rio Grande Properties," came her cheery voice just one second before he hung up and wheeled back around to check on Juliana himself.

"What took you so long?" he barked.

She laughed. "Someone's grumpy. I was in the ladies' room. Want details?"

"Sorry. I need you to check something for me online."

"You've got it. I'm on MLS now."

"No. Do a search on the name Cord Ramsey or maybe Cordell." Rio struggled to keep the sarcasm from his voice as he recalled the way the varmint had introduced himself to Juliana. A more obsequious bastard he hadn't met. "Add in McCulloch High School," he thought to suggest, knowing that was the only one around.

"Can you spell it please?"

His body was tensing by the second. Striving to keep the frustration from his voice, Rio said, "R-A-M—"

"Not that, you moron, *McCulloch*."

"You shouldn't call your boss a moron," he complained, but did as she asked.

He could hear her fingers flying over the keyboard just before her breath let out in a *whoosh*. "Cord Ramsey. Oh, he's a cutie."

"And you're married." And Rio was growing closer and closer to turning around.

"Don't growl at me," chastised the best office assistant a man could have. "I'm married with a teenage daughter. I'm trained to notice these things. What gives?"

"Just tell me about him. What did you find?"

"Nothing very current. Most everything is dated several years ago. There's a few awards, some sports headlines..."

A glutton for punishment, Rio asked, "Like what?"

"Ramsey catches for one-hundred-forty yards, leads the Rebels to victory. Ramsey offered thousand-dollar scholarship. Um...looks like he was named to the National Who's Who list, both junior and senior years. Voted Most Popular... How much more do you need to know?"

Nothing. He knew all he had to. He'd left Juliana with a goddamn Boy Scout. Mr. All-American.

So why didn't he feel any better? Perhaps because Juliana *liked* Cord and seemingly, not him.

"That's it. Thanks." He started to hang up but remembered just in time. "Oh—one other thing. Cover for me today if anyone calls, will you? Tell 'em I'm in meetings and check with the Carvers, see if we can move their closing up a few hours?"

The sooner he cleared his schedule, the sooner he could return and save Juliana from the Benitos or Cord—or himself—Rio wasn't sure anymore.

"Consider it done."

## Chapter Seven

“Heaven-sent,” Cord whispered under his breath. *An angel.*

Carefully setting the towel and bowl he carried on the nightstand, Cord soaked in the sight of Juli snuggled in his bed – *his* bed. Interesting that Rio had locked her in this room.

Curled on her side, breasts rising and falling with each quiet inhalation, she was a sultry, silent angel. Golden blonde hair flung across her face, hiding her eyes. He gently brushed the silky strands to the side to reveal black smudges and if he wasn’t mistaken, mascara tracks on one cheek.

Had she been crying? He wasn’t sure, but her lips curved in a soft smile. Whatever had gone before, pleasant dreams were occurring now.

Beauty perfected, despite the mess.

Enchanted, Cord stared at the woman in his bed, letting her presence soothe his soul like a balm, and for once, not fighting the well of feelings. His body responded immediately. Chest tightened. Heart pounded. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Arousal pouring through his veins, swelling his cock in an instant.

What was it about the little lady that got him so riled? His very soul was clamoring with unanticipated need for her.

Wrong or right, he couldn’t resist the lure to touch. Her ankle peeked out from beneath the covers and he laid the pad of his index finger over the slight bone where it was reddened and irritated, simply feeling her skin. Cool. Hot. He couldn’t decide. He braved two fingers flush against her ankle. A rush of heat blasted through, making him suck in a sharp breath.

Good Lord. When he was around her, something in him lightened. That dark, black hole in the center of his gut, the pain that never ceased, seemingly eating him alive...it all but disappeared. The sight of her made him feel warm and tender. Excited about life, almost...happy.

And he wanted more. Needed it. Needed *her*.

Cord closed his eyes for a minute, fighting demons who wanted to suck him under, take him back to that black place. But he refused to surrender, instead concentrating on how *she* made him feel. He wanted to take her body with a ferociousness that frightened him.

It had been too long since he’d had a real woman. Since he’d experienced the act of love. Felt pleasure from something other than his own hand.

How could he involve himself with any female, knowing that monsters haunted his mind? The nightmares he had every time he slept, sometimes even while awake. The mood swings and flashbacks and illusions that took him by surprise...

The things he'd seen had been too much. He'd lost control a long time ago.

Worse, how could he not touch her? Take her? Just looking at her, he felt better...and oh, how Cord wanted to be healed.

He was the monster for even thinking such things. Did he think fucking an angel would save his lost soul?

Cord blinked his eyes open and stared. The allure she exuded, even while unconscious in sleep, was stronger than his willpower. His soul versus her body...

His cock didn't care.

Along with her underwear, his heart was MIA, so it didn't get a vote.

Damned if he did. Damned if he didn't.

His mind decided to let her decide. That seemed the only rational course. If she said *no*, he'd walk away without complaint, give her his protection, the safety of his home, and nothing more. If she said *yes*, well then, he'd lose himself in her warm, willing flesh and banish his demons for as long as she'd let him.

He sat on the edge of the bed and traced the bottom of her foot, caressing the scratches she'd accumulated during her mad dash. Noticing how his hand shook, he lifted his palm and placed it securely on her shoulder. "Juli."

Mumbling, she shifted closer to him.

It would be so easy to lie down, to cuddle next to her, to bask in her body heat. To take her innocence and wash away his past. Damn, he wanted that.

He'd likely scare the shit out of her.

"Juli." He shook her gently. "Wake up, darlin'."

She groaned, stretching like a cat. "What time is it?" she whined, sounding like a little girl, desperate for an excuse to go back to sleep.

"Almost four. Rio left hours ago."

"Left? *Four*?" Juli shot straight up, clutching the blanket to her chest, her mascara-smeared eyes instantly wild with anger. "You're kidding! Tell me you're kidding!"

His angel had suddenly gone Goth. Damn. If anything, she looked even hotter.

Cord gave a quick shake of his head, followed by an instinctual twitch of his hips. Unintentionally, he fantasized about making a move on her. Wondering what she'd do if he placed her hand over his erection. Slap him? Blow him? He grew harder. "He asked me to look after you."

"The bastard," she hissed. "Son of a bitch!"

A chuckle escaped Cord. He'd laughed more in the few hours since meeting her than he had in months. Curse words just didn't seem right coming from her. Even

bruised and tattered as she was, something about the way she carried herself screamed elegance.

"What's so funny?" Juli demanded, brushing her tangled hair away from her face.

"That sort of language plain doesn't suit you."

After Rio left, Cord had gone out and picked fresh blackberries. He retrieved the bowl and kitchen towel he'd brought in and set them next to her on the mattress. "Here you go. Breakfast and lunch all in one convenient servin' size."

"Thanks, but how would you know what suits me? Maybe I have a regular sailor mouth. Maybe I deserve to."

"Nah." He settled closer and lifted a blackberry, brushing it over her lips. "You're too ladylike. Too sweet. You're not a cusser."

"Oh yeah?" She claimed the fruit with her lush lips, winking. "Sweet and sour, maybe."

"No. Just sweet." He picked up another berry, this time squeezing it before he fed her, so that the red juice ran over his fingers, just as her lips brushed his skin. "Delicious."

He brought his finger to his mouth, licking it clean, staring at her all the while. Beneath the smudged makeup were strong, high cheekbones, the envy of any of those magazine cover models. Her eyes were warm, the sparkle in their depths deepening the longer he stared. Her mouth was too wide, lips a hint too full. Nope, Juli wasn't a conventional beauty, her features were each independently too strong, but the combined effect struck him more than a lightning bolt to the forehead. "You're beautiful, but I'm sure you hear that all the time, don't you?"

"A woman never gets tired of genuine compliments," she said in such a way that Cord could tell she knew his words were sincere. His chest puffed up a tad with pride. His cock did too, but he was attempting to ignore that for the time being.

Picking up another berry, she said, "Truly—thank you. I'm glad *someone* appreciates me."

So Rio didn't appreciate her? Just what was going on between the two of them? Rio had said Juli wasn't his girl, so what was she to him? Before Cord could ask, she was off again. "I just can't believe what Rio pulled. The nerve! He steals me away, brings me out here then *dumps* me? I'm gonna tear him a new one."

"Just like you tore one on last night?"

"How —"

"I've flirted with enough bottles of tequila in my time to know the signs. How's your headache?"

"Seems like you're the mind reader," she grumped with a smile, "so why don't you tell me?"

Cord pursed his lips and grazed his fingers over his scratchy jaw. Damn. He needed a shave. Low priority though, when he had a cussing angel in his bed. Taking his time

evaluating her, since she'd just invited him to, Cord swept his gaze over every inch, noting the mussed exterior, wrinkled forehead, but mostly the clear eyes. "Appears you've recovered sufficiently from your evenin's indulgence. I'm sure sleeping the day away helped too."

Her irritation returned full force. "Yeah. Helped Rio escape and avoid one hell of an overdue confrontation."

Cord cleared his throat. "He says you're in danger, that the threat's real. That he brought you out here to protect you."

"I'm an adult." She wrung the towel as if it was Rio's neck. "And come on. He unloads me in this rathole located in the back of beyond *with a stranger*...to protect me? I've seen crack houses that look better than this dump."

Cord was stunned silent. Accurate or not, her words cut. He stared at her; she glared at her breakfast.

"It isn't fair," she whispered finally.

"I wouldn't hurt you," he told her, swallowing his pain. Something he'd become good at. The place *had* become a shithole, but it sucked to hear it out loud. Pride be damned, he forgave her and brushed his fingers over her forearm. "Please don't be scared of me."

"I'm not. And I know Rio never would have left me if he thought I was in danger. From you." She looked at him then, unfallen tears shining in her eyes. "So I guess you're on his side now?"

"I try not to take sides. Seen enough fighting in my life." *Enough to kill a man inside.*

Unwilling to leave her presence even though he didn't like the turn the conversation had taken, Cord stood and made his way to the window. He tried to see his home as a stranger would...

The giant oak stood like a sentry in the left side of the front yard, the thick woods, full of pine trees and memories, stretched out behind it. The creek was that direction, too... Off to the right as far as he could see were the fallow fields that once brought prosperity to this ole place. Now overgrown. Dried and dead.

The dirt drive split the middle of the yard, winded through the woods for miles and eventually led to civilization. *If* one wanted to return to it...

No matter what *she* saw, Cord saw his birthright, what he'd just spent eight years wasting his life for. His family had worked the land for too long for him to just lose everything.

"I just want my dump back." And he'd do anything to keep it. Not that he exactly minded keeping her around. Truth was, he kinda wanted to. The deal with Rio just gave him a reason.

"Cord, I'm sorry." Regret filled her voice. "I shouldn't have said that."

He gave a quick nod. He didn't expect her, or anyone, to understand what the place meant to him. "It needs work, but it's my home."

"I'll bet you'll make it shine," she offered, easing the strain between them. "Really. I'm sorry. I was out of line. I'm frustrated and took it out on you. I apologize."

"Not a problem." He took a deep breath and consciously exhaled the tension knotting his gut.

"So what's the deal? When is Rio coming back? For that matter, why'd he leave?"

Cord turned back to her. He suddenly felt lighter. "Said he had business to attend and then he's picking up supplies. A day or two, I reckon."

He wished it were a week. A year.

"Slime-sucking bastard," she hissed again then looked slightly abashed.

They both laughed.

"Something freeing about being in the backwoods with no film crews around," she continued. "I can cuss to my heart's content."

"Bring it on, darlin'," he said with just a hint of a dare, curious whether she picked up on his meaning.

Juli sighed but didn't respond as he might've hoped. "Well, I see no reason to wait around for him."

"I can't let you leave." *Not a chance.*

Juli's eyes narrowed. "I don't recall asking you."

"You're over twenty miles from any type of civilization. That's a mighty long walk. Especially without shoes." Especially if he tied her to him and refused to budge.

"This is ridiculous." Pure annoyance shot from her eyes. "Since I haven't seen one, do I assume correctly that you don't have a car?"

"Score one for the lady."

"I'll call for a cab."

He shrugged, stifling a smile. "No phone service."

She was quiet a moment, glaring at him. "Darn. *Damn*," she flipped off. "Well, he better bring me something to wear. Until then, I guess I'm stuck like this." Juli motioned to her torn dress. "Willing Captive Chic—think it'll take the fashion industry by storm?"

"I can scrounge something for you to wear. Mr. Blackwell might not approve, but it'll be clean at least." His cock twitched at the thought of her in his clothes. His fingers tingled at the thought of tearing her dress right off.

Tapping his hands against his thighs, he cast about for something to say. "I'm sure you'd like to get freshened up."

"A bath would be wonderful."

"A bath, huh?"

"Sounds heavenly." Her lips curled upward again and he knew he'd do anything to keep that beautiful smile there. Even draw a bath.



"Then a bath it is. I'll get it ready for you. Finish your berries."

\* \* \* \* \*

Juli's stomach was in such an uproar, she hardly felt like eating. Though she might be tempted—if *he* were still feeding her. She glanced down at the remaining blackberries in the bowl.

Goodness, the way he'd touched her lips—so gently, so sensually...almost as if he were intent on seducing her mouth.

She was wet.

If it weren't for the circumstances, she'd be tempted to stay with Cord just for the enjoyment. And Rio could stick that in his tamale and smoke it.

Because he'd *never* touch her again. Not after what he was doing. To think, she'd once admired him. Thought him to be a perfect man—a gentleman!—the centerpiece of her romantic fantasies. Well, no more!

She wished she'd never set eyes on him again!

*God, no*, her mind protested.

Ugh! She popped two blackberries in her mouth and chewed then set the bowl aside. Hmmm, for some reason, these weren't quite as good as the ones Cord had fed her. Not as juicy.

*Like your cunt?*

Holy crap. Where had that come from?

Smiling like a confident seductress—and enjoying the role even though no one was there to bear witness—Juli grabbed another berry then swung her feet over the edge of the bed. She arched her back, hearing several vertebrae pop and crack as she worked the kinks out.

How had she fallen asleep so quickly? And stayed asleep so long? Especially in a strange place. She never let her guard down like that.

Walking to the window, she peered out. As expected, Rio's SUV was gone. As least her headache was too.

She didn't get it. *Why* had he left her?

They had a discussion item or two—make that ten—and she was going to get out of here, face him down and *make* him talk to her and explain himself then she'd continue with her investigation whether he approved or—

The evidence!

Juli dove for the bed and shoved her hand beneath the mattress, instantly encountering cold metal. Her heart rate returned to normal. She still had it in her possession, safe and sound. For now. She really needed to get the clasp fixed. Which she'd do as soon as she arrived back home.

Rio might think he was going to stop her from leaving here but he wouldn't. And twenty-some-odd miles? It might take some doing, but she could cover that in less than a day, Juli told herself, remembering the half-marathon she'd run two years ago. *If* she had her shoes...

She just needed to find a way to get through the door or out the window. Never one for skydiving antics, Juli settled on the door. Already she'd tried to jimmy the lock and though old, found it surprisingly stubborn.

So...

Wait a sec. Cord, bless his heart, had left the key. There it was, resting innocently in the doorplate all this time. Either he'd forgotten it...or he'd misplaced trust in her.

Rio was gone, she could get out of here!

And just as hope flared, it fizzled.

Yeah, she could run, right this very second. But not with a torn dress and bare feet, and Cord was even now, drawing her a bath. Would be returning for her at any moment. Crap. Her woodland sprint would have to wait.

She needed to eat too, for her strength. Hungry or not. Going back to the bed, she picked up the bowl and started munching. Wild berries. No way could she buy these in a store. And they weren't bruised or aged one bit. They tasted as fresh as could be...had Cord actually gone out and picked them for her? Incredible.

There was definitely something about him. Something earthy and primal that appealed to her on every level. Something needy.

And dark. Oh-so dark. Every time he faced her, his eyes hinted at more than his journal could ever reveal... Why did she feel such a kinship with him?

She hardly knew him, but whenever he was around, she wanted to hug him. Kiss him. Love him until he smiled that sexy smile, the one that revealed the dimple in his left cheek.

She'd like to feed him some berries.

Hell, maybe she would. Screw Rio.

She couldn't blame Cord for wanting to keep her here. He just wanted his home back. Rio on the other hand...

"Isn't worth thinking about," Juli told the next berry just before it disappeared into her mouth. Her mind awl, she finished eating, surprised Cord hadn't come back yet. How long did it take to turn on the hot tap?

Idly glancing around, she saw where she'd dropped her purse after stashing the watch earlier and picked it up. Lipstick constituted her only makeup. It was better than nothing. And... "Score one for me," Juli said, pulling out a condom.

Hey, given her situation, *why not*?

Take that Rio, she thought, biting back a smile at the idea swirling through her mind. In less than twenty-four hours, she had two strikes against her when it came to having sex. Two men up to bat, no hits.

Something told her Cord would know how to hit a home run if she invited him into the game. No fouls, no wife—no hesitation. Just hot, down-'n'-dirty sex, the kind a gal told her girlfriends all about. *If* she had a working phone.

Such behavior was so out of character, but at the moment she didn't care. Must be her lack of underwear. All that air rushing under her skirt was blowing away her common sense.

Lucky for her.

She folded the condom in her palm. Just in case.

## Chapter Eight

Her step light, Juli walked from the room, listening for running water. "Cord?"

Silence. Nothing going on upstairs so she headed down. Once on the ground floor, she spied a bathroom off the main hallway. The cozy pink-tiled room was already misting with water vapor but the taps weren't running.

"All done?" she called out just as Cord turned the corner carrying a huge, steaming pot.

"Almost. One more batch and you should be good to go." He bypassed her and went straight into the bathroom where he proceeded to pour the blistering-hot water into the massive claw-foot tub.

He was *boiling* her bathwater?

She stared in amazement. "You don't have running water?"

"Of a sort. It comes out orange and rusty, definitely not something you'd want to bathe in. It's on my list of things to fix, but for now I'm getting it straight from the well." He shrugged, that good-ole-boy grin tugging at her heartstrings. "Hot water heater's out too. I'll get to that eventually." Before she could stop him, he was gone. Then she heard the back door slam.

He was pumping water from the well? Then boiling it? *For her?*

Something inside Juli melted. When was the last time he'd boiled his own bath? Heck, maybe she would just ask him to join her...

Juli felt her juices run thicker at the naughty thought.

In full seductress mode, she sauntered into the bathroom. The water in the half-filled tub had turned the air into that of a humid jungle and she breathed it in. Her silk dress clung to her body like a lover's caress and Juli couldn't help but notice how her nipples had peaked beneath the cowl neckline. As if homing beacons, they drew her fingertips until she was lightly pinching them and moaning into the empty room.

The moment she heard Cord come into the kitchen, she reluctantly moved her hands to her side and hollered out before she lost turned her nerve. "Cord! Turn off the burner and come in here, would you?"

Four seconds later he was there. Straw-blond hair hanging over his bruised face, lanky yet strong frame, sad-hopeful eyes. And slightly out of breath. The sexy way his chest rose and fell, as if he'd hurried when she called turned her on even more. "Everythin' okay?"

"Everything's great," she said leaning into the wall and feeling cool tile everywhere her dress wasn't. "Can I jump in or do I need to wait? The water was steaming."

"Nope. Given how long it takes to heat several batches and because the porcelain in the tub is so cold, by the time the water's all poured, the temperature's great."

"I take it you've done this before?"

That half grin tilted his lips. "A time or two."

"Mmm. It looks heavenly. Do you have any soap?"

"I...um..." Cord hesitated a moment then edged past her and went to the sink, opening the vanity mirror above it and revealing an inset cabinet. He scrounged through the contents then pulled out a bottle and gave it a couple of quick shakes. "Somethin's gloppin' around in there."

He handed it to her. "Who knows how long this has been in here or if it's still any good, but I tossed the dried-out slivers of soap yesterday. They were pretty useless."

She stared at the old bottle of lilac body wash. "Thank you. Cord, I'm thinking the water level's fine." She straightened, curving her fingers on the loose neckline of her dress. Making no effort to hide her actions, Juli pulled the edges apart and shimmed, letting the black silk glide past her hips and fall to the floor. She dropped the condom packet on the pile and traced her index finger down the center of her torso. "With two bodies in the tub, it should be perfect, don't you think?"

"Two bodies?" His face was flushed. It could've been the heat in the bathroom, but she didn't think so.

"Come here." She motioned for him with a crooked finger. "Let me help you with those dirty clothes."

Appreciating the view she'd revealed like any good soldier, Cord stood at attention, but didn't budge an inch, so she walked to him. "Cordell?"

Beneath the week-old whiskers, she saw the muscles in his jaw flex. "Juli."

Just that. Just her name and that jumping muscle.

She shifted with sultry intent. "Do you want this?"

She could tell by his expression that he did but she wanted to hear him say it.

"I have to be honest here. I'm not lookin' for anything more than the moment, no promises or —"

She halted his words with a finger to his lips. "Did I say I was?" She traced the contours of his sexy mouth, loving the way he'd started to tremble. "I said, do you want *this*?"

Juli skimmed her finger over the swollen bump on his nose. *Poor man*. She was determined to make up for all he'd suffered on her behalf. "Do you want *me*?"

"Please." He sounded as if he were in pain. He closed his eyes, gulping. "Love me."

His entreaty only made her more eager.

Juli laid her hands on his shirt-covered chest and stood on tiptoe. Their lips met and an unexpected burst of cinnamony flavor made her growl. His tongue slid into her

mouth as his lips claimed hers. She leaned her head back, welcoming his kiss. So slow, so deep. So hard.

She wound her fingers in the fabric, clenching the soft flannel while he kissed her. With each second that passed, the embrace became more heated, more passionate, and she knew he needed her as much as she wanted him.

Deep inside, she wanted to give him this. To make him feel good. Loved, as he'd asked. To erase the images his tortured journal entries had created in her mind. Images she knew *lived* in his.

She wanted to take away his pain. And hers.

Cord moaned into her mouth, his fingers tangling in her hair. His moist lips smeared over her chin, her cheeks, her neck. She went for his buttons, fumbling to get them undone.

A moment later his shirt hung open and she was going at his jeans. No finesse, no patience, just desire. Hot, raw and hungry.

They stumbled toward the tub together as his denims fell to the floor. Juli's hands went to his hips and encountered hot, smooth skin. Nothing but skin. "Going commando, soldier?"

Calloused fingers lightly tweaked her bottom. "I didn't want you feeling left out, you know, bein' the only one without your underwear."

Ahh. They both knew what it was like to lose their most intimate garments. To lose themselves.

To *lose*.

She sensed that about him. Hated it about herself. Everything she loved, she lost...

Thoughts of Rio invaded her mind and she smashed them down, refusing to let him ruin this as he'd ruined all of her other sexual encounters. She couldn't allow herself to go there, not anymore. He wasn't dead, wasn't a fantasy. And he definitely wasn't the man she'd thought he was, not if he could let her grieve alone for so long.

Palms covering her bottom, Cord squeezed both cheeks, reclaiming her attention as if somehow he sensed it had wandered.

Stepping into the tub, he lifted her against him and Juli eagerly wrapped her legs around his waist, hugging tight.

"God, I hope I don't wake up," Cord whispered.

*That made two of us.*

Her thumb played over his slightly swollen nose and the yellowish bruise forming under his right eye. She kissed along his raspy jaw then tongued the salty skin of his neck, biting him gently. "You're awake now. We both are – very awake."

"Thank God."

Together they slid into the water. Rippling eddies of warm water caressed her legs and pelvis. Perfect. As she intended the next few hours to be.

Cord guided her to sit between his legs facing him, her legs draped over his thighs, and brought them intimately close. She watched the way he watched her – waiting, as if taking his cues from her actions. Well, if he expected her to cry shy now, he was in for a big surprise.

Reaching behind her, Juli gently scraped her nails up his shins and knees. She saw him swallow and smiled.

“Don’t stop now,” he encouraged, and her heart sped up.

She rubbed her palms up and down his thighs. The coarse hairs covering the bunched muscles prickled her palms and spiked a flare of longing deep in her abdomen. Then she explored higher, stroking his chest where the hair was softer.

Positive she’d never enjoyed a bath so much, Juli drizzled warm water down his torso, watching as the droplets landed in the water surrounding his cock. He was hard. His impressive length poking up through the water and waving at her.

“What have we here? A little soldier who needs attention?” She took him in hand and Cord moaned as she pressed her thumb to the back of his cock head.

“Christ,” he breathed, leaning back in the tub and giving her full access. “It’s been so long. Touch me more. Harder.”

“Better yet, I’ll wash you.” She reached for the pink bottle, but his hand caught hers.

“No. Not yet. Just touch me. My dick. Please.”

“Okay.” She didn’t hesitate to obey him – she wanted to give Cord what he needed. Everything he wanted.

She took his erection in her grasp and molded her fingers around his width, moving slowly up and down as she touched him, exploring the soft skin of his shaft.

His breathing grew shaky and Juli looked up, noticing again how he watched her. Studied her.

“Feels good. Better than good.” He closed his eyes tight and braced his arms on the sides of the porcelain tub. His jaw flexed as he fought to remain still. “I just want to feel good.”

She was going to make him feel even better. “That I can do. Relax, you’re too tense.”

“Slower,” he ordered when her motions along his erection started to pick up speed.

“Really?” Juli stalled, but kept a firm grip on him, bringing her other hand to his balls. “Umm...the way your cock is pulsing in my hand, I thought maybe it’d been a while and you might need to come quickly, take things slower later.”

“Lady, you’re killin’ me here, but as temptin’ as that offer sounds, I don’t want to rush a bit of this.”

So he wanted to play hardball? Wanted to show how much self-control he had?

"Fine by me." Releasing his erection, she floated back and reached over the edge for the soap.

"I didn't say to stop," he grumbled.

"Shhh."

Rising from the water, Juli retrieved a washcloth from a shelf above the toilet then sank back down and soaked it, squirted the liquid soap over the cloth and straddled him with her legs splayed wide. "Open your eyes."

"Juli..."

"Watch me. That's an order." The scent of lilacs filled the air as she leisurely skated the foamy cloth over her torso, sensuously, covering every crevice of her body with the soap. Bubbles slid along her skin, falling into the water around them and Juli splashed to her knees, laughing. "Oops. Got the floor wet."

"Don't give a damn."

"Good. Me neither." She turned away from him and slid the sudsy cloth along her legs, bending forward, allowing him to see all as she washed everything within reach as tortuously slow as she could. When she reached her second foot and was scrubbing between each toe, Cord growled.

"Hold me steady." The second he wrapped a secure hand around one calf, Juli rested her opposite foot on the edge of the tub, opening herself completely to his gaze as she washed thoroughly between her legs.

"Mercy." Cord swore under his breath. "Come here."

"Wash my back?" Cunt throbbing, she slid down into the water.

He took the washcloth and smoothed it across her back, from her shoulders, down her spine to her hips where he plunged his hand underwater to tease the top half of her bottom. With his free hand, he toyed with her hair, wrapping it around his fingers and tugging her head back.

"God. That feels good." He tugged a mite harder and she moaned, loving it.

"You could drive a man over the edge."

Slipping her head free and turning to face him, Juli took the washcloth and filled it with more soap after giving the bottle a hard shake. "I drive lots of men over the edge."

"Now that I can believe."

"I'm a reporter."

He laughed as she explored his body, letting her hand trail along every bit of his lean muscle. With firm strokes, Juli cleansed away the dirt and sweat covering him, and she hoped some of the pain too. She wished she could erase the haunted look in his eyes. Keep him smiling at all costs.

Maybe she couldn't do that, not realistically, but she could give him this.

She took his cock in hand, noticing the way his shaft took a swing to the left. *Intriguing*, she thought with a smile, bathing it from base to tip with first the soaked



cloth then her hands. When his erection was so clean it squeaked, so strong and sexy she could hardly breathe, she took the washcloth and squeezed water over his entire length.

A strangled groan erupted from Cord's mouth. "Juli."

"Hmmm?" Feeling daring, she slid her hands into the crevice between his legs and washed his ass, flicking her fingers over the tight bud when she reached it, teasing him.

He grunted, his hips lifting upward. "Juli, *please*."

"Just feel," she told him, rubbing the cloth around his balls.

"I'm done feeling," he growled. "I want to taste."

He grabbed the washcloth and tossed it from the tub. It skidded across the counter and felt to the floor with a plop. His hands caught the outside of her thighs and he tugged her against him.

"Taste?" she breathed. "Perhaps eat?"

"All of you. I want to consume you."

*Consume you...*

His words echoed throughout the bathroom. Yeah, he'd like to take whatever it was about Juli "The Reporter" Sex Kitten that made him feel so damn light inside. Bottle it. Swallow it whole and never ever return to the dark place that hovered in his soul. Just waiting to suck the life out of him.

Touching her didn't just feel good, it made him burn, blaze with a need so deep, a need that only she could fill. Being with her burned away the memories.

They might be taking this encounter with a hearty dose of hurry-up-and-wait, but Cord felt as though he were in a whirlwind. As if the world were spinning out of control with every second he spent with her. He was dizzy. Crazy with lust. Giddy with anticipation.

Making love to her would end that. He never wanted this to end.

Cord wanted this strange feeling to last forever.

"I've decided you're too far away." He hauled her onto his lap, letting his cock press against her hot and ready pussy. Driving into her would be easy, too easy.

But if all he wanted was a quick fuck, he could've done that with his hand. No, having a woman like Juli in his house—his damn bathtub—meant taking his time. It meant controlling his urges until he thought he'd die if he didn't have her. It meant savoring everything about her that made her a woman. His woman for as long as she stayed.

Cord wrapped his wet hands in her long hair and urged her head back. She arched her spine, which lifted her chest, offering her ripe breasts up for his pleasure.

"Your tits are perfect." He gazed at the two luscious mounds adorned by rosy nipples. More tempting than a chocolate sundae, he thought, his mouth watering at the sight.

"Why, thank you, sir, for the gallant compliment."

He backtracked in his mind and replayed what he'd said. "God. I'm an ass." His fingers tightened on her torso and he tore his eyes from her chest to face her. "Sorry. The desert must have sucked my social skills dry."

She was smiling. "Fine by me, soldier. Isn't there something else you might want to suck?"

He didn't need to be asked twice. Cord took her nipple into his mouth and flicked his tongue over the tip. Increasing the suction, he drew a good portion of her breast into his mouth, nursing the flesh, *taking*.

The tight knot of her nipple was such a contrast to the puckered, pliable skin surrounding it. Excitedly, he sucked harder. Had his lips ever been blessed by such a treat?

Juli moaned loudly and lifted her body against his. "The other one. Now."

"Bossy little thing, aren't you?" he spoke around her breast. Almost afraid to acknowledge his good fortune, Cord released her, his teeth grazing the sensitive bud as he moved from it and planted tiny kisses across her chest. Reaching the matching peak, he took her other nipple in his mouth, consuming the soft flesh.

"Oh yeah, just like that," she encouraged breathily. "What else you got?"

Drawing sharply on her nipple, he ate at the mound, not stopping until she groaned. Smiling, he gave her breast one last swipe with his tongue then licked his way down her rib cage, to her belly.

"Stand up. I want you at my mouth." Cord untangled his fingers from her hair, sliding his hands to her hips to help her rise. Water sloshed from her body and sprinkled over him as she straddled his face. He inhaled her scent, her very essence, and knew in that moment it was everything.

All he needed. All he wanted.

*Juli.*

His angel.

Spreading her open, he dove into her wet folds with his tongue, stroking along the silky flesh. Loving her very core.

She ground her cunt against his face, demanding more, and he answered by nibbling on the sensitive flesh 'til she squealed then sliding his tongue into her vagina and fucking her with it. She moaned and rode his face, her hands pulling at his hair. "You're going to make me come."

"Then come, baby. I want to drink your juices. To take you inside me." *As far as you can go.*

Juli shuddered with ecstasy as he continued to eat her pussy. Watching his blond head diving between her legs was a total, absolute turn-on. Seeing this gorgeous man's naked body, wet from their bath, hard from her touch, centered at her core and lavishing attention on her starved flesh soothed her ego and fanned her own desire more than she could've imagined.

Cord's hot breath and hotter mouth danced over and inside every bit of her pussy. One of her feet skidded along the slick porcelain and his grip tightened even as he increased the motions of his tongue.

"Oh God."

"Come on, baby," he breathed into her flesh.

As if obeying the encouragement, her loins constricted and released, her vaginal muscles convulsing with hot pleasure. She couldn't hold on, didn't want to, and she lost it, her orgasm hitting her in a torrent of release as she bucked against his mouth.

Cord drank her up, lapping at her folds, drinking her liquid and groaning as if her cum tasted better than amaretto and cream. Her entire body quivered and Cord steadied her. He kissed her thigh, wiping his jaw on her. Feeling the week-old whiskers against her sensitive skin made her moan for more.

"That's my angel."

*Angel?* Something about the endearment caught at her ears, but her body was too busy zinging from her climax for her to pay attention.

Every muscle went limp as he stood, lifting her once he'd gained his footing. Their wet bodies slicked against each other as he carried her out of the tub. The entire bathroom was still fogged, misty with steam and sex. Humidity touched every surface from the counter and mirror to her face and thighs. Even after coming, Juli shook with desire, needing to feel his beautiful cock lunging inside her.

Her cunt twitched at the thought.

Once he'd set her feet on the floor, Cord turned her to face the wall. "You just stand here," he said, bracing her palms against the tile. His warm breath blew past her cheek. "Yeah. Just like that."

She waited. Her sex clenched. She waited some more. Quietly, she asked, "What? Are you holding off until the camera crew arrives? The director yells 'Action!'?"

Laughing weakly, Cord leaned forward until his cock rested against her low back. He nuzzled her neck. "I don't have anything down here," he whispered apologetically. "I...guess I could pull out. Or run upstairs for —"

"You're such a gentleman." Angling her head until their lips almost met, Juli told him, "Didn't you notice? I had a condom with me. It fell on the floor, but if you find it..." Swinging her butt, she brushed against his erection. "We both get what we want right now. And I for one," she added, smiling when he dropped to the floor to scrounge through her discarded clothing, "can barely wait another moment for you to be inside me, so hurry it up, will you?"

Cord found the rubber, tore open the wrapper and slid it on. "Any second thoughts, darlin'?"

"Only if you keep stalling."

Without further ado, he stepped behind her. His knees brushed against the back of hers as he bent, placing the tip of his erection at her entrance. Juli felt him testing her with fingers and cock, watched her own white-knuckled fingers claw the pink tile. "Thought I told you to hurry, soldier."

"Yes, ma'am." Cord curved his hands around her waist and lifted her off her feet the same instant he plunged inside her pussy, ramming to the hilt. She screamed out, rocking against him.

Oh God. He was there, inside her, reaching so deep, caressing the inner walls of her vagina just as she'd needed for what felt like forever. "Oh yeah. That's what I'm talking about!"

Driving into her with sure, steady strokes, he lowered one hand and played with her clit, teasing the hood, pulling it back then patting the tight knot. She could hardly stand it.

"Earlier, when you were washing me, was that a hint?" he asked.

She had no idea what he meant. "A hint?" she gasped. "What're you talking about?"

"When you touched my ass."

All she could do was moan in response.

He abandoned playing with her pussy and dove his hand between her legs, reaching high past the crease to explore her anus.

Cord's strong legs and firm hold were the only things buffering her from falling on her proverbial ass. His fingers were wet from her release, her current desire, and he slid them over her anus, lubricating her. Tying with her. Torturing her.

She whimpered, wondering how far he'd go. She needed...more.

"Hold on." Cord withdrew his touch and she screamed in protest. "Trust me, darlin'. Grab the counter." And without waiting for her to make sense of the command, he whipped her around and pushed her torso down until her upper body landed on the waist-high counter. Leaning back, Cord traced the crack that split her ass and she felt one of his fingers press into her bottom. Greedily, she flexed the muscles in her rectum, drawing him deeper while her pussy clutched his cock and she humped him for all she was worth. His finger slid deep, in and out, branding her as he increased his thrusts, taking her harder, faster, like a wild man.

Another orgasm peaked in her, exploding, spiraling, and her world turned inside out as she cried for more, cried for relief.

And he gave it to her only seconds before claiming his own.

His cock jerked in her and he shouted, burying himself deep. Leaning his cheek against her shoulder blade, Cord folded his arms around her, his hands on her breasts,

holding her with such intensity she knew in that instant that he didn't want to let her go. Ever.

## Chapter Nine

His fifty-eight-inch plasma screen flashed to black and Tito Benito hurled the television remote, uncaring when it rebounded off the polished surface of his desk with clang that echoed throughout the converted warehouse walls.

"Now let me be clear about one thing, *pinche cabron*—you sorry-ass goat," Tito spewed the insult as though it were poison. As his feeble-brained brother Diablo had become to the family. A stupid, bound-up piece of shit who couldn't do his job—and Tito would be damned if he went down for him. "Brother or not..."

Tito deliberately calmed himself. Only losers lost their temper. And he was a winner. Always. He leaned forward, bringing the vase of fresh pink carnations that Rosa had brought in closer, his fingers caressing the ragged-edged petals. His precious little Rosa made all his boutonnieres—but she wasn't working fast enough. He needed to talk with her about that, after he dealt with the *idiota* in front of him.

A lifetime he'd spent building this empire, first being groomed by his *padre* then on his own when the old relic had been stupid enough to get caught, convicted and thrown in the slammer. Well, Tito was smarter than his father. He was smarter than all of them. Tito wasn't about to lose everything he'd worked for because some white-bitch reporter didn't know how to keep her damn nose out of his business. A reporter *he* was being blamed for kidnapping. If he'd been kept in the loop, the damn *puta* would be dead by now. Not missing. *Dead*.

Visibly battling the stupefied look on his jowly face, Diablo fidgeted uncomfortably in the chair, clutching his third burrito as a spurt of gas slipped from his fat ass. "Who says I know anything 'bout that dumb bitch?" Diablo's hand went to his lower abdomen, rubbing as he winced. "Jesus, maybe I shouldn't be eating this one."

"You'll be lucky if it's not your last goddamned meal," Tito ground out, disgusted and in more ways than he could count. His office now smelled like a damn shit factory and he wasn't fooling around—his line of work allowed no room for mistakes and his younger brother kept making one after the other. First the botched shipment fiasco then the Philly screwup and now this. "Cousin Dominic confirmed we have a hit out on the white whore—and if I didn't call it, you did, so stop hiding your face behind that slop and come clean or I swear..."

Diablo bit off another hoggish chunk of burrito. "All's good, Tony. All's good," the swine swilled with his mouth full, using his real name even though the *pendejo* knew he didn't like it—too ordinary. Tito liked the things in his life to be *extraordinary*, just like he was.

"Everything's gonna work out, I promise," Diablo said around another bite. "It's all under control."

Certainly, just like D's bowel movements. Smug fat idiot. The media was all over this kidnapping—the Feds as well. And since the KKK had been ruled out as of this morning, they were all screaming *Tito Benito* loud and in sync. *Not* what Tito likened to “under control”!

Temper spiked, Tito crushed the flowers he loved so much, only realizing it when the shredded petals crumbled from his fist. Maddier still, he reached across the desk and smacked the burrito from Diablo's hand, sending it flying into the wall with a splat, just barely missing his new television.

“Care to expound upon exactly *what's* under control?” Tito leaned against the desk, clutching the cold, sharp edge, tempted to shove it into Diablo's lily-livered gut and paste him alongside the burrito. “I don't like secrets, D, particularly big ones that have *me* being fingered for kidnapping!”

“I didn't get a chance to do nothin', I swear.” Another burble of gas came from Diablo's chair. Dammit. The rotten-egg stench was invading his pristine office.

Tito lightly brushed his fingers over his slicked-back hair, smoothing what was already smooth and perfect to begin with. His brother might be a slob, but Tito wouldn't let their unfortunate proximity soil his person. He wouldn't. Maybe after the funds were secured from their next exportation, he'd finance Diablo a gym membership, tell Rosa to give the dirty bastard a makeover, clean him up. Teach the stupid fucker how to have pride in the Benito name.

“I tell you, Tony, I didn't nab her.”

“No fucking kidding. If you had taken care of her, I wouldn't be in this mess—of your making.”

Diablo glanced longingly at the lost-cause burrito. When Tito cleared his throat as if he meant business, Diablo swung his attention back around, his mouth slightly agape, fear glazing his black eyes.

Ah finally, his *pinche idiota* brother comprehended.

“I didn't want to worry you none, but she's been sniffing around more than we knew.” Diablo shifted in his chair, filling the air with his stink yet again. “Asking questions—the wrong kind to the right people. I was gonna check in with you, see if you thought it best I snatch her off the streets, thought maybe I'd have a little fun with her first before turning her over to you. You know, check out her tits...”

His buffoon of a brother. Thinking with his dick. Most useless part of his body. Tito barely restrained the urge to upend his desk into Diablo's groin and break his useless cock in half. He breathed out, counted to three. No...he'd save the energy. Expend it pounding into Rosa later tonight.

That thought brought a smile to his lips. But Diablo was still blubbering his excuses and with every word, Tito's brief good humor dried up more. “Then I stopped by some high-falutin' coffeehouse—you know, just to use the john—and there the pretty *puta* is in the back corner having a little chat with Johnson Mitchell. Just like that. I couldn't believe it. When Mitchell saw me, he cut out and rushed over, said how he was talking

some sense into her, that he flashed his badge and told her to back down for the sake of a case."

"Mitchell?" A dirty cop who had been lucky enough to find himself on the Benitos' payroll—and had proven himself over and over. A man Tito trusted and who knew far too much, including which officers were working both sides of the law. "You didn't believe him?"

"Couldn't afford to. He *is* a cop, so I put someone on Mitchell and turns out, they meet again—him and that reporter, morning before she was kidnapped—and I got the feeling he gave her something, that maybe she recorded their conversation."

"What made you think that?" Tito wanted to know. Thinking wasn't Diablo's strong suit.

"On account of she's been investigating the family business from all sorts of angles, asking her reporter questions to all our past contacts—even the ones behind bars. I found that out when I started checking around after seeing her with Mitchell. I couldn't let it go, now could I?"

So, his brother had managed to do one smart thing by not letting suspicion ride. His compliments. But one question was still unanswered.

"The bastard flipped." Tito stated the obvious while plucking a single carnation from the vase, one in full bloom. He snapped off the stem and twirled the flower in his fingers. "But that doesn't explain *why* they're both missing. Do you want to answer that for me?"

"The hits are out, Tony, but they both vanished before we could get to 'em."

No one, *no one* crossed the Benito family and escaped without severe—and permanent—retribution.

Tito pinned the beautiful carnation to his lapel, inhaling the flower's delicate fragrance as it wafted in his face. The scent of death. His favorite. "Find her. I want you on the reporter's house day and night. Toss it. Find out what she has and destroy it. *Destroy her*. Dominic can fish for answers elsewhere."

"But I got someone already on—"

"*You*, Diablo. You. And until she and whatever she has on us are found and disposed of, don't you dare budge off this, or so help me, you'll go the way of our *padre*." Who'd just taken a knife to the ribs in prison, under Tito's orders, but D didn't need to know that. "Messy way to go, wouldn't you say?"

Diablo lumbered to his feet as Tito walked around the desk. "What about Mitchell? You want me on him too?"

"He's mine." At the door, Tito turned back, glancing in the direction of the splattered burrito. "Clean up that damn mess before you leave."



## Chapter Ten

*Star of wonder, star of light...*

It was up there, he knew it, the star that guided the Magi to Bethlehem ages ago. Cord searched the sky, wished he could pinpoint exactly which one it was. Hell, he wished he knew anything about the stars. He had to hand it to Iraq, the night sky was beautiful, reminded him of Willow Creek. About the only thing that did in this godforsaken land.

Sneaking glances at all the silver and blue dots shimmering overhead was the only peace to be found as his patrol skulked through the night, guns in hand. Ready to kill. Already dead on their feet.

The night was almost over. He'd lived through another day. But in a couple of hours the sun would rise again, hot and hellish, heralding imminent death once again. Even when the sun was at its highest in a clear blue sky, dark, oppressive clouds hovered over them threateningly. No, not in threat, he realized. In promise.

Who would be the unlucky bastard to go next? Would it be his number that was finally up? A fighting rebel? One of his friends? When would it happen? How much time did any of them have left?

And just like that, his questions were answered. But instead of crawling through the desert, Cord found himself jammed in the back of an Army-issue truck, sweating bullets in the icy night air, stuffed between his buddies Travis and Pete like sardines in a can, only instead of fins that swam effortlessly through the ocean, Cord had arms that were glued to his body, clutching his weapon as if it were a cherished lover. As if it were the only thing standing between another sunrise and death.

Which it was.

"Insurgents! Take cover!" Pete's screeched announcement was confirmed by the ear-splitting shriek of tires. Within the truck, the entire unit scrambled, readying semis, waiting.

Waiting for death.

"Stop the truck! Back up!" someone hollered. In the midst of crossing the bridge, they were easy prey for the attacking insurgents on the street below.

The big truck lurched in reverse. Stalled.

*Poppoppoppop!* The insurgents' machine guns pointed into the air, spraying bullets straight from the underworld.

Christ, if they were going to be sitting ducks out here, waitin' to die, couldn't they at least have drivers who knew how to shift gears?

Disneyland, Disneyland, fucking Disneyland.

Sweat trickled down his brow, messin' with his view, making it harder to sight in as Cord aimed at the vehicle speeding toward them and fired, instinct taking over, even if his heart was no longer in the fight. Just shoot. Shoot. Shoot. Shoot.

Kill or be killed. Kill. Kill. Try to live.

*Poppoppoppoppop! Poppoppoppoppop! POPPOPPOPPOP!*

"I'm hit! I'm hit!"

Pete? Trav? Blackness and confusion engulfed Cord. Gunfire surrounded him. *Twinkle, twinkle little star...* Shoot or die.

*POPPOPPOPPOPPOP! POPPOPPOPPOPPOP! POPPOPPOPPOPPOP!*

"Oh God. Me too. I'm shot. Fuck, it hurts!"

Cord couldn't escape. This couldn't be real.

Why couldn't he see? Why was everyone dying?

*POPPOPPOPPOP!*

Why wasn't he?

"Stop it! Just stop it!" Cord screamed at the gunfire and crazed shouts echoing in his mind. He whipped his arms to the side, unable to hold his rifle up another second. Wait. What happened to his weapon? Defenseless?

He was bloody defenseless? He strained upward. "Stop it, you motherfucker!"

Strong hands caught his shoulders, shook him. Fought him. Slapped his face. Was he being tortured?

Never! Just kill him already, let him die!

"Stop!" Cord lurched up, flinging his attackers over, pinning them down. "Leave off, you bastards!"

Why wouldn't the sound of bullets go away? The memories of all his murdered friends fade?

It should have been him. Why never him?

"Shhh! Cord! Cord, you're safe now. Safe," the voice of an angel urged. "It's Juli. Calm down."

Juli? Ah...Juli of the tattered dress, the bruised but rescued body and the finest ass on the planet. *Juli.*

He was home. *Home.* Willow Creek, not Iraq. It was just a nightmare. A dream. Not real. He blinked, his vision clearing, his mind waking as he stared down at her, saw the way she glowed under the moonlight gleaming in through the window, amazed by the warmth suddenly growing inside him. The rapid way he forgot all else but her.

"Cord." She gave him another shake. "What happened? Was it a nightmare?" As if treading dangerous ground, her questions came softly. "The war?"

Sweat beaded his skin, his heart pounded. He licked his lips, but couldn't answer, not yet. Cord realized she was still pinned beneath him, her arms stapled to her sides. His grip slackened and he relaxed atop her, burying his face in the crook of her neck, inhaling the scent of her sweet flesh.

She held him tight. "Cord?"

"It was nothing, darlin'."

At least that's what it felt like here and now, in her arms. Nothing.

"It didn't sound like nothing," she protested, hugging him harder.

"I'm fine." What he was, was a bloody liar. "Fine."

"You were screaming. You said you were shot."

"Shot? I wasn't shot, baby. Really, I'm fine now." Hooking his fingers in her long golden locks, he kissed her collarbone, breathed in her essence. Lilacs and love. It was his grandmother's body wash, but Juli's body changed it. Made it her own. Made it intoxicating. "You smell like happiness, you know that?"

Juli moved beneath him, freeing her hands from his loosened hold in order cup to his face. Sheer determination kept Cord from flinching when she touched his sore nose, the bruising under his eye. He wasn't about to do anything that would keep her from caressing him as she was now, running her nails through the whiskers on his cheek.

"Happiness and sunshine *and sex*." He growled the last part, still unable to believe his good fortune—to be stranded with a veritable sex goddess, one who cared. Or at least pretended to. Given what he'd been through in recent months, that was enough for now.

"Cord, if you don't talk about things and deal with your past, it'll always haunt you."

"Don't you see? I am dealing. Just like this. Concentrating on you, I can forget everything else. Like it's a world away and never even happened."

Cord had no idea why—maybe he just needed to hear her laughter—but he tickled her, his fingers racing along her sides, bringing forth the melodic sound of her protests, which released his tension, thawed his very heart.

"Cord!" she cried, half laughing, half frantic as she wiggled and dodged. "What are you doing? Be serious!"

And then the little turkey tickled him back. Cord practically jumped through the roof, howling at the intensity—he'd always been more ticklish than a man ought to be. Then inspiration struck and he caught her hands, tugging her from the bed, covers and all. "Come on, darlin', there's something I gotta show you."

Juli was still laughing when her bare feet hit the floor. Laughing more out of nervousness than anything else—he'd been screaming *so* loud, had seemed so terrified.

She'd never seen a man howl like that and her every instinct wanted to fix him. But she knew she couldn't, knew from the things in his journal that *she* wasn't what he needed. But neither could she tell him no nor deny what little comfort she could offer.

If he would just talk about it, release what was torturing him inside...

His palms clammy with sweat, Cord pulled her through the hallway, flicking lights on as he went. Bare feet flying over the wooden floor, blankets trailing, Cord dashed down the stairs and out the front of the house, bringing her with him every step of the way. Releasing her hand, he darted into the yard, threw his head back while beating his fists against his chest and spinning around, letting out a full-throated yell that could be heard clear in Texas.

Juli leaned against the porch beam, smiling at the picture of a grown naked man acting like carefree boy. After spinning and hollering so many times it was a wonder he wasn't dizzy and hoarse, he stopped and focused on her, coming forward. "Look at that, darlin'. Isn't it the most stunning thing in the universe to behold?"

"What?" No sooner than she asked, Cord swooped in, cocooning her in the blankets and hauling her off the porch and into his embrace. He didn't stop until they reached the center of the scraggly yard, her back nuzzled against his chest, her feet cushioned by the earth. The covers were wrapped securely under her arms—around her body. "Cord, you're butt-naked, boy-o. It's the middle of the night. Aren't you freezing?"

Although snug within the circle of his arms, Juli realized it wasn't that cold outside, more that she'd frozen on the inside when Cord had screamed upstairs that he'd been shot.

"Shhhh. Told you I'm fine." He ducked his head, whispering in her ear. "I want you to pay attention to the night sky. The stars. Nowhere in the world is it prettier than it is right here. I know that for a fact."

"*I know that for a fact,*" she mimicked, relieved at how relaxed he sounded. "Regular Einstein, aren't you?"

"Watch that smart mouth of yours, hotshot reporter, or I might put it to better use." While she was busy sputtering, his fingers tilted her chin. "Here—take a look."

Cuddling against him, she finally saw what he was talking about—a million diamonds glittering amidst total blackness. "Oh wow. I don't think I ever took the time to look—really look—at the stars before."

"Well, look now, for as long as you want." Cord raised one arm and guided her head until it rested against his chest as her eyes avidly devoured the midnight, star-studded sky beyond the treetops. "Look to your heart's content."

Absorbing the sight never before appreciated, Juli realized that not once in her life had she felt smaller, more at peace. Despite everything—nightmares and tickling, ominous recollections of great sex and her anger at Rio, the Benitos and her rapidly fading concern about her job and Barbara's desk blotter—that here, now, in Cord's arms, holding on while he held her tight, she felt like a tiny, insignificant speck in a giant, grandiose universe and for once, it felt good to feel small. Pressure-free and

without stress. Peaceful. "You know," she whispered, still awed, "seeing all this puts life in perspective, doesn't it?"

For a few moments they just stood there, leaning into each other, breathing in unison. She felt Cord's heart rate calm until it was beating with hers in a slow and steady rhythm that lifted his chest beneath her back.

After ceasing their ceaseless chatter when Cord had burst through the door and done his crazy chest-beating, jungle-man thing, the critters of the night had resumed conducting nature's symphony. Juli couldn't ever remember being outside long enough to notice, much less listen or enjoy. She did now.

She reveled in the solid, almost imperceptible thump of Cord's heart beating behind her. She savored the sounds of bugs and insects whose sole purpose she previously thought was for squishing. Most of all, she enjoyed the playfulness this off-kilter ex-soldier brought to her life.

"They kept me going." Cord finally broke the silence. "The stars did. I used to try to figure out which one led the Magi to baby Jesus. Never did find it, but I just kept promising myself one day I'd see *these* stars, *this* sky again, and it would all be over."

She heard the emptiness in his voice, the need. "But it's not over. You're still reliving it every time you sleep, aren't you?" she ventured, torn between insisting he talk about his nightmare and letting him be, giving him the serenity that he said she and the stars brought him.

"Sleep? Who can sleep through the sounds of machine guns?" he said, and she heard the sarcasm he didn't attempt to hide. "Who can sleep when they've been living in hell and come home to heaven, only to find it's been sold out from under them?"

"Oh Cord." God, what this man had been through. What he was *still* going through.

He rested his chin on her shoulder and muttered, "I was supposed to go to Disneyland when I returned home. Was gonna grab Grandpop and take off for Disneyland."

"Disneyland, Mr. Prickly?" Juli reached up blindly until encountering his jaw, tracing her fingers over stubbly whiskers—whiskers that were poking into her bare shoulder with every word he spoke, reminding her of his handsome, scruffy countenance, curious what kept nagging at her, why she kept thinking she should remember, *know* something about him but didn't. It was as if her mind kept prodding information to the forefront but her body kept pushing it away. One thing was certain, she was drawn to Cord, compelled to comfort him, yet at the same time...deep down, she knew she couldn't fool herself into believing she was what he needed. That Disneyland was what he needed.

"There's something about you, Cord," she said reflectively, "that I just can't seem to—"

"Get enough of?"

"Whoa ho, funny man." Juli whipped her arm away from his face and around their combined torsos until she could tickle his side. He flinched. "*Place*. I was going to say something I just can't place, something familiar about you. Have you ever been to DC?"

"Nope. Never." He restrained her tickling fingers by clamping his hands around her wrists and turning her until she faced him. The blankets fell from her breasts and became trapped between their bodies. "Familiar? I don't remind you of your brother, do I?"

"God, no. I'm an only child."

"Tsk. Tsk. That can only mean one thing then," he said in such a grave tone that her heart did a little stutter.

"What?"

"That while you were growing up..." Cord laughed again, erasing any seriousness between them. "You weren't tickled near enough." And he immediately applied himself to rediscovering her ticklish spots with a vengeance.

It only took a fraction of a second for Juli to cry, "Uncle!"

"I'm not your uncle, baby!"

His fingers were everywhere. Laughing so hard Juli wasn't sure which hurt more—her stomach muscles or every inch of her skin—she hollered, "Mercy! You win. I give! I give," until he finally stopped and she could bring much-needed air back into her lungs.

Breathing hard, clueless when she'd ever laughed so much, Juli curved her hands around his waist and stared up at the handsome planes of his beat-up face that was tinted blue on one side from the sparkly night sky and gold on the other from the lights inside the house. "When you do make it to Disneyland, I might just want to tag along. I've never been."

That raised an eyebrow. "Rich girl like you?"

"What makes you think I'm rich?"

"Rio said 'sheltered upbringing'. I took that to mean your parents were loaded. Was I wrong?"

"No..."

"It's all in the breedin', sweetheart. You ooze success."

Huh. "And here I thought I oozed sexuality. I must be losing my edge."

His arms tightened. "Never."

"Growing up, my family went on 'educational vacations'. You know, art museums, history exhibits. Aunt Muriel's international stamp collection."

"That had to suck."

"Yeah," she whispered, "because sometimes you just want to be a kid."

"Even as an adult." Without warning, he kicked her feet out from under her and dropped to the ground, taking her with him. Juli yelled as he rolled them through the

short grass atop the cold ground, 'round and 'round until she was pinned under him, the covers in disarray beneath them both. He dropped a wet kiss on her forehead. "Miss Juli Reed, around me, you can be a kid whenever you want."

"You're crazy." Juli's very soul laughed. Never had she felt so free as she did right then and there, pinned under this complex man. "It's fabulous."

His finger explored her mouth, skimming over her lower lip as he murmured, "I'm fabulous, huh?"

"Yes," she confirmed on a whisper. Tingles followed his finger back and forth along her lips. "Fantastically fabulous."

"Fabulous enough to love?"

"Undeniably." What else could she say? Cord...Cord *was* fantastically fabulous. Fabulous enough to love. Any woman would be lucky to get such a sweet guy. And if it weren't for her current stressful circumstances, the fact she lived three hours away, *Rio*, then maybe, just maybe...

The conversational tidbit dangled between them, as though mistletoe hung overhead and they were two kids, kids who knew they should and could kiss but were scared to. Confused.

"You're blocking my view." Juli gave his chest a shove, rolling him off so she could see the sky. "So, starman, we're out here. I'm a captive audience—pun not intended. Give me the grand tour and show me what you know."

Cord nestled alongside her body, relaxing into the ground and drawing her into the crook of his arm. Juli snuggled in, finding her comfort zone. How many other opportunities would she have to lie outside—in the nude—at night and with such a sexy, intriguing companion?

Cord pointed to an area near the horizon. "See that group of stars over there? Shaped like a circle? The one with a wavy tail?"

"No." In truth, she saw stars everywhere. Even in his eyes.

"Right there. It's the Big Dipper." He pointed overhead at Cassiopeia, one of the few constellations Juli recognized. "And there, that's Orion."

"Orion, hmmm?"

"Yep. And do you see those four stars right there? That one's known as the Eastern Cross."

Juli was pretty darn certain there never was and never had been an *Eastern Cross*. "Oh? And what constellation is that a part of?"

"I'm thinkin' the panda bear, but don't hold me to it," he said, holding her closer. "I might have that one confused with the parakeet."

"Mmmm. Do they have a star for lovers?"

Not missing a beat, he pointed straight up. "Sure, right there. The Heart of the Sky. They say that those who gaze upon that particular constellation together, well, the stars'

energy is so great, it intoxicates the senses, makes lovers go wild, have sex outside under the night sky."

Heart of the Sky? Intoxicates the senses? Come on! She might not have paid much attention in science class, but *that* she would've remembered. She'd have aced the test.

"Well, I can't seem to find it." Juli made a big show of leaning forward and searching the sky then she gave him an elbow to the ribs. "Maybe because you're bluffing!"

"Omphh!" Cord clutched his side, defending against a second attack. "Okay, okay, You caught me. I know nothing about the stars. Just that they're pretty, like you."

"Jerk." He might be right about star energy though. Because he was so darn cute and she was so darn tempted...

Needing the closeness between them, Juli returned to his embrace and placed a hand on his chest, noticing that his heart had resumed beating a mile a minute. She pressed her palm flat, feeling every thud inside herself. "Want to go back to bed now?"

"Not really." His voice was flat, revealing nothing yet everything as his heart kicked up another notch, pounding furiously. "Not ready to go back to bed yet."

"Your dreams are awful." Juli didn't know whether she was making a statement or asking a question, she only wished he'd confide in her. After what she'd read in his journal, she knew he was hurting. Knew that he needed someone.

"Awful? Yeah." He squeezed her a little tighter, as if holding on for dear life. As if he never wanted to let her go. "But I'll tell you one thing—waking up to you sure made tonight a whole lot easier."

And that scared her more than anything, the prospect of him depending on her. Needing her so very much, when she suspected, deep in her heart, she needed another man.

"Cord, Rio's going to return. I won't always be here." It was the cold, hard truth and they both knew it. Had to face it.

*Had to?* Why was she deluding herself? She *wanted* Rio, wanted her life back. Wanted that damn disappearing, reappearing Latino back in her life more than she needed air to breathe. The sooner the better.

"So how'd you two meet? You and Rio?"

Cord's question made Juli nostalgic for the past, for far more simpler times and she found it surprisingly easy to share how she'd just celebrated her fifteenth birthday and was all excited over the horse her parents had surprised her with. They'd *told* her they were taking her to some Egyptian art exhibit—ugh! Laughing with several of her friends, thrilled she wasn't about to be subjected to halls and walls of dead mummy pictures, she'd come upon him—Rio Tarin, one of the new security guys hired by her father in response to some death threats he'd received.



"I wasn't supposed to know about that," she confessed now, "but either I had an uncanny knack of being in the wrong place at the right time or eavesdropping just came naturally."

"Ah, a necessary talent for the excellent reporter I'm sure you are."

"Coming from the guy who's never seen me on the air, I'll take that compliment with a pound of salt." Juli chose not to detail how her father hadn't taken the threats seriously but her mother had, hence the increased security, or how Juli thought that the new burglar alarm system had been fine and though she complained about the stricter curfew, she could live with it, but most of all, she chose not to talk out loud about the new man who had been hired or her initial impressions of him.

Rio Tarin. She remembered thinking *heaven on earth*, seeing the finest stud to ever walk—no, not walk. *Walk* was too tame a description for how he moved, all full of grace and purpose. Sinuously, she thought now, with just enough confidence it bordered on cocky. The man had strutted. Strutted, yeah, that was it. Wearing seriously hot black boots and body-hugging jeans, Rio Tarin had strutted across her mom's overly manicured lawn, pistol shouldered beneath his arm, muscles bulging beneath his shirt...he'd been every young girl's fantasy come to life.

And Juli had known she wasn't going to be a *girl* forever...

Cord cleared his throat and his grasp tightened just a tad, bringing her back to the present. "He sure thinks you're in danger."

"And I sure think he's overreacting. I still can't believe how he—"

"Hey look!" Cord sounded excited. Threading their fingers, he directed her attention to a tiny white dot zipping across the inky sky. "A shooting star! Let's make a wish."

"Uh, Cord..." She really hated to disillusion him, but man, Cord must have hated science classes more than she did. "That's a satellite, not a star."

"Fooled you, darlin'!" he said, bringing the back of her hand to his lips then securing it on his chest. "I actually knew that. Trust me, me and the guys all liked seeing satellites orbiting overhead. Amazing how something so simple would feel like a connection to home, but I'd rather think of it as a shooting star ready to grant me a wish."

"What would that be?"

"Tell me how you managed your way into this mess—Rio thinkin' that you're marked by a gang. That's pretty heavy stuff for someone like you."

"Do you really want to waste your wish on that? *Now?*" When he obviously had so much more to talk about but just wouldn't?

"My star. My wish," he insisted, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "I need you to talk to me, keep my mind busy. So yeah, let's talk about you. Tell me about your job."

"My job. Okay. You really want to know about my job?" she couldn't help but ask. The second his fingers made as though they were about to start tickling, Juli started

talking. Fast. "After I graduated, I took a job at the station I'd interned with. At first, I did whatever projects they handed me, small, boring stuff mostly, but as my time on the job and reputation grew, I was able to start choosing some of my own assignments."

"And you didn't waste any time, trying to bust the big guys, did you?"

Her laughter was humorless. Way she saw it, she wasted entirely too much time. "I didn't start my career that way. I was all about making a difference. I really liked focusing on the good things people do. You know – the types of things that rarely make it into the news but make a big difference in the overall scheme of life."

"Anythin' stick out in your mind?"

Juli couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice when she told him of a story she'd felt really passionate about. "Once, I did a feature on the Shriners' work with burn victims. That one really got to me, seeing what fire victims go through. So much pain. It was there that I met this woman—her husband had doused her in gasoline, set her on fire. Left her half-dead, blind, her arms completely useless. She had three kids, Cord—three kids to support. I almost couldn't stand it and I had to do something, so I organized a fundraiser, used all my coverage time putting the word out, trying to help her family, and all burn victims."

"The world needs more people like you." He sounded as though he really meant it and Juli felt better about her job than she had in ages. "Hell, I wish I could..."

"Could what?" she prompted when he stopped, noticing how his hand had become lax over hers, as if he were really concentrating.

"Forget it. I'm hardly able to help myself right now. Maybe one day... Nah." Cord seemed to shake off his pie-in-the-sky thought.

She didn't say anything, but with those words, he'd touched another little piece of her, this amazing man who had no idea the good he had done already, fighting for his country.

"So what happened with you? How'd you go from fundraiser to hell-raiser?"

Juli made the mental note that before she left she'd make sure he did know how special he was. For now...he'd asked her to talk and talk she would. "My boss didn't think it was so great, me spending my airtime like that. Called it a waste of station resources. By then, I'd done a few investigative reports and exposés whenever they were assigned. Got handed the calls to the station nobody else wanted. I just happened to hit a few cases that went high-profile and boosted ratings. The next thing I knew, the jackass of a station manager told me to go sensational or just go home. 'No one cares about that feel-good crap,' he said. I was too close to making anchor to leave." Really too chicken, but she didn't have to confess all her idiosyncrasies to a near stranger, one who made her feel like a princess or not. "So I focused on the investigative exposés as ordered."

"What is it about this particular investigation that has Rio so determined to keep you from leavin' here and you so determined to go?"

Juli cozied back up to his chest and looked at the spinning stars, wishing she could feel small and inconsequential again. "The Benitos—this one's personal. They're the biggest drug runners in Washington and I want them in jail."

Juli felt Cord's embrace shift. "Drugs?" The sharp edge to his voice could cut glass.

"Nasty ones—heroin, mainly. And trust me, they don't care whose hands it ends up in, so long as they're raking in the cash. They've targeted schoolkids and..." She couldn't say any more, pictures of some hooked children—as young as ten strung out coming to mind.

"I hope you nail their asses to the wall then. I ain't got no sympathy for drug pushers, none at all. But why are you so determined to get these guys all by yourself? No disrespect meant, darlin', but to hear Rio tell it, you're way out of your league on this one."

"It just hits too close to home for me to leave it alone."

He made a little sound of interest, one that said she hadn't given him near enough. She wasn't sure she wanted to confess more, but she really owed him tit for tat after invading his privacy as she had, even if he wasn't aware of it.

With a deep sigh and a more solid snuggle into Cord's side, twining her legs between his, she continued. "My college boyfriend Jeff and I...we were so in love, had even talked about marrying after graduation. He started using. At first it was to help him relax after studying then it was to help him stay *up* for studying then it became all he wanted to do. Jeff OD'd our senior year. And just like that, he was gone." Juli all but choked on her words. "I should have done more, tried harder to save him."

"You couldn't have." Cord gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Users can't be controlled."

"Still..." Juli sighed, shaking off the shadows of the past, the familiar guilt that plagued her life. Rational or not, even *thinking* her parents dead on the day it happened had always weighed heavily on her conscience, just as Jeff's death did. "I should have done *something*."

"Trust me, this is one subject I know more about than I care to admit," he said evasively. "If someone's bent on their own destruction, there ain't a damn thing you can do for them if they aren't ready to accept help."

"I guess you're right." Knowing it and believing it were two vastly different things.

"Of course I'm right. I'm a man."

Grinning in spite of herself, Juli got back on track. "So when this cop came to me, said he'd give me what I needed to expose the Benitos, I wasn't about to turn him away, danger or not."

Cord propped himself on his elbow and gazed down at her. Starlight illuminated half his face, branches creating zigzag shadows along his body as he tugged at a long, tangled strand of her hair. "What did he give you? Information? Evidence?"

"Don't involve yourself any more than you are, Cord. It's not worth it."

He went still. "Drugs killed my ma. Overdose." He looked at her pointedly. "And believe you me, there wasn't a damn thing any of us could've done to stop her."

"I...I'm sorry." She saw the darkness return to his expression, the pain, and didn't ask questions. If there was one thing she knew, it was how much memories could hurt—and Cord was in enough pain.

"Trust me, this is all worth it, just getting to know you. I'd risk a helluva lot more for the chance for *more*. You're fabulously fantastic, Jules." He grinned at the backward words and she knew they were genuine. She couldn't help but return his smile.

God, no matter how well she knew the story—after all, it was her own—she couldn't help but marvel at how she'd landed here, on a backwoods plantation in the middle of Virginia. How the events of the past couple of days, hell, her whole life, could be real. How all this could be happening.

She glanced over at the run-down house. "Pretty ironic, wouldn't you say, that Rio owns this place now. We wouldn't have met otherwise," she mused. "Sure made it convenient for you to fall in with his plans so easily, didn't it?"

It was almost as if some higher power—

"Easily?" Cord interrupted the thought with a bark of protest. "You call a busted nose and bruised ribs easy?"

"Speaking metaphorically."

Cord glanced up at the stars then back at her and she saw the need flash in his gaze once again—that sky overhead was one thing he couldn't stand to lose. "Do you think he'll honor it? Return the deed if I keep you here?"

"The old Rio, the man I used to know? Definitely. His word was his bond." This new man? He was practically a stranger... And Cord was becoming less and less of one.

Juli shuddered, cold now that Cord had stopped holding her. Cold from more than just the nighttime temperatures. Cold from the way he hurt, the deep ache inside herself, the reality that nothing, *nothing*, would ever be the way she'd dreamed as an innocent teenager with her first crush. Rio, life as she wanted it...pure fantasy, completely impossible the last ten years. Now possible, knowing he was alive, but still—practically speaking—completely impossible.

Then there was Cord. Warmth and affection. Laughter. And fun, even amidst his secreted misery.

"So, soldier, what's so special about Disneyland? You have a thing for Minnie Mouse?"

"No, goofy. *Goofy*." And out of the blue, he moved the covers aside and smacked a raspberry above her bellybutton.

"Noooooo!" Juli laughed. "I don't know you well enough for you to spit on my stomach." Still giggling, she tried to roll from his determined lips.

Holding her waist steady, Cord moved his mouth a fraction. "Spit? You callin' my raspberry a spit kiss, lady?" And he *thrummppedddd* another one on her belly.

"Ahhhhhhhhh. Stop. No more!"

But Cord ignored her and kept 'em coming. Across her stomach, lower, down her abdomen then lower again, stopping just above her mons, causing Juli to cry out for a different reason altogether when instead of going lower one more time, he raised his head and delivered a long, loud, tongue-vibrating raspberry to the underside of one breast.

"I give! I give." Juli wiggled beneath him, her belly and breasts—her pussy—on fire from his wet kisses. "I love your spit. *Love it.*" She wrestled her hands free and brought them to her torso, ostensibly to rub his kisses in but really to push him away before she expired. From lust or raspberries, she wasn't sure.

Could one be tickled to death?

"Love it?" he growled, sliding his lips higher up her chest. "Good girl. Then have another taste." Cord crawled over her body and plastered his lips to hers, thrusting his tongue inside to stroke against hers. At the same moment, he centered his cock between her thighs. Three mind-numbing kisses later, he licked her lips and withdrew. "Wanna go inside and fuck?"

As if he even had to ask.

## Chapter Eleven

*Hijo de la chingada!*

Rio wrenched open his SUV and crammed his body into the driver's seat. He pulled the door shut with such a vengeance the shock reverberated straight up his bad arm. "Son of a bitch!"

All he wanted was to get things taken care of and get back to Juliana. But oh no. Life wouldn't be so cooperative, would it? Of course not. Murphy seemed hell-bent on stepping in Rio's way every chance he could.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, had gone right since the moment he'd spun out of his—make that Cord Ramsey's—dirt lane and headed north toward DC yesterday morning. The drive, which should have taken just over three hours, had taken closer to seven.

First, he'd had a flat, and by the time he changed the spare and hit the interstate, some big rig had jackknifed, spilling hazardous chemicals across the roadway, effectively shutting down traffic.

To make matters worse, he was faced with shiny vintage car upon car, making their way through the creeping traffic and reminding him of the classic car show he'd thought of attending but abandoned in favor of an afternoon of football then rescuing Juliana. With every '55 Chevy Bel Air and '64 Ford Galaxie 500 XL or any other classic convertible that inched by, his secret yearning for one of his own rode him hard—as if he weren't already hard for other reasons.

His body was on fire from the heated images his mind wouldn't quit conjuring of the two of them—Juliana and Cord.

*Why?* Why hadn't he claimed her when Cord asked? It had been the perfect opportunity.

"Yeah. There is something between us," he could have easily said.

"To be honest, Cord, Juliana and I have a lot of unfinished business. Of the personal kind, if you get my drift."

"Keep your stinking hands off my woman. *Junior.*"

"Well, Ramsey, now that you ask, I've been fantasizing about Juliana since she was, oh...sixteen."

*Kerpow!*

He could just feel that right hook slamming into his cheek again.

And that was another thing—he looked as if he'd been in a barroom brawl. Hell, even the decent side of his face looked like shit.

While baking on the pavement during the stalled-out traffic, Rio had rehearsed his explanation. *I walked into a door* wasn't going to cut it.

Yeah. A door with two fists. He'd finally settled on a convenient version of the truth, telling his clients that he got in a fight protecting a lady's honor. He'd met his buyers at their home thirty minutes ago, expecting to drive them to the closing.

The closing that had been rescheduled for *Thursday*. The closing that was supposed to be taking place *right now*. The closing that his conservative, old-school clients had just postponed, saying they needed to see the property "one more time". And they expected him to take them.

If the sale hadn't been thirteen-point-seven million, he'd turn it over to a fellow agent in a heartbeat, or put 'em off. Claim he had the flu. Salmonella. *Chickenpox*. Anything to get him out of DC pronto.

But real estate agents didn't broker transactions like this one every day and Rio couldn't afford to jeopardize his business just because Juliana Reed had his cock singing "Hail to the Chief" for the first time in two-plus presidential terms.

Rio gritted his teeth, knowing he had to be scraping off a layer of enamel, but not giving a damn. He should have anticipated something like this. Maybe it was his payback for tossing Juliana's shoes out the window after she fell asleep.

Of course, the Carvers' latest real estate venture just had to be in eastern Maryland, which meant a several-hour drive in the opposite direction, *away* from Juliana and Cord.

And if he was stuck here in DC until mid-week—or worse—then Juliana was stuck back in Virginia. Without him.

With Cord.

How Rio hated contemplating that scenario with every cell of his being.

Why the hell had he left Juliana there?

Why hadn't he thought to hook up the phone service when he arranged for the electricity after buying the place so he could at least check on her? Why hadn't he thought to take her home and strap her across his bed? Make love to her body so thoroughly, so completely until he dominated every inch of her being and soul that she meekly agreed with anything he said?

And there he went again, becoming aroused. *Aroused*, dammit!

What he wouldn't give for a patch of earth and five minutes of solitude.

Rio started his engine and headed home, trying to pay attention to the road, trying to think of his job. But no...all he could think of was the way Juliana had looked at Cord. With those big sparkling eyes of hers, practically glazed over, her lips glistening wet...

The same way she'd looked at him.

While sucking his cock. Getting him off.

*For the first time in a long, long time.*

Rio gripped the steering wheel. Juliana crawled under his skin like no one else. She'd gotten him hard and kept him hard. Even after she saw his scars. Hell, he was hard now just thinking about her.

All he wanted was to bury himself in her sweet pussy and stay there forever.

*Her sweet pussy.* For all he knew, Cord was licking it even now. Up in it. Enjoying what Rio had yet to sample.

What should rightfully be his.

His balls ached at the thought. Heat blazed along his shaft, his head pulsing with the rush of need that plagued him as he imagined Juliana fucking that damn stranger. Imagined the sight of another man thrusting inside her cunt, bringing that scream of satisfaction to her lips. Envisioned a healthy, unscarred body sliding against hers, pumping between her spread legs.

Rio groaned as his desire skyrocketed.

Jesus. What was wrong with him? Had he lost his fucking mind? Becoming excited at the idea of *watching* Juliana with someone else?

Hell no! He wanted her all to himself. She belonged to him. Always had.

She was just too young at first then he, with his stupid hang-ups, was just too stupid to face her. But no longer.

Rio unclenched one hand from the wheel long enough to slide his palm down the front of his jeans.

God, he was stiff. Hurting. So damn turned-on...

His buddy Tom was right. He was completely obsessed. After all these years, he wanted Juliana more than ever and he knew she wanted him too. As a woman, not just some starry-eyed teenager with a crush.

A crush he hadn't been able to get away from...

He'd worked for her dad about ten months and had picked her up from school. In six blocks, she'd gone from talking about her day to asking him how things were going with his current girlfriend. The girlfriend he'd invented two months earlier during another of Juliana's Q&A sessions.

First a dog then a woman. He'd become rather adept at fabrication, hadn't he?

God, if Governor Reed had known how familiar his daughter was becoming with the "hired help", Rio knew his ass would've been grass. He liked his job, wanted to keep it, expected to keep it. No sheltered female with a sassy mouth and flirtatious, sultry eyes was going to get him canned. His attempts at letting her down gently hadn't worked and Rio knew it was time for bald-faced honesty.

"I'm not romantically interested in you," he'd told her straight out after more of her questioning. Good thing he hadn't been plugged into a lie detector.

"Ten tamales says I could make you interested. *Rio.*"



Boy, they learned young how to bring a man to heel, didn't they? That's what he got for sharing some of his sister's homemade cooking the last time the crazy woman mailed him a care package. "Don't even go there," he told Juliana. "I work for your father and I'm too damn old for you. End of discussion. And you should probably call me Mr. Tarin."

"If Hefner can do it, so can —"

"Please, Juliana. Stop." He couldn't stifle his laughter. "And don't go comparing me to magazine moguls who stay in their bathrobes all day while women young enough to be their granddaughters hang all over them. That's the last thing I want in my life."

She went from flirty to serious in a blink. "What do you want in life? Really?"

He'd stalled out right there. How did he tell a sixteen-year-old his life's ambition when he didn't even know himself? Taking the easy way out, he lobbed the question back at her. "What do you want? To be head cheerleader?"

"Grow up."

He'd tried again, smiling now. "Miss America?"

"Get real. All I want is to be a mom. One who stays at home and has lots and lots of babies."

"Babies grow up, you know, *ángelita*."

"Yeah, but we'll hang out, do fun stuff together, maybe go to Greece as a family, stuff like that. My kids will be happy. I'll be happy."

Happy? That concept had been present in his home but absent once he stepped foot outside. He'd grown up in a rough part of San Antonio, down in Texas, and had enlisted in the Marines straight out of high school. It was that or sellin' dope and stealin' cars as the rest of his buddies were doing—those who hadn't already been thrown in juvie.

After doing two tours, he'd come out of the service ready to serve his country closer to home and had immediately gone to college, majoring in criminal justice. Rio had hopes of entering the FBI after obtaining his degree.

Instead, during his senior year a private security firm recruited him and several other graduates. It was while protecting some visiting dignitary he'd met Governor Reed, who'd hired him to watch over his daughter after his family became the targets of persistent threats. A glorified babysitter, he'd often thought of himself, but the pay had been fantastic.

And Rio had proceeded to fail miserably at his job. Juliana was always slipping away, causing him grief and making him choose between protecting her and protecting her from punishment, not to mention the sexual attraction that simmered between them. She'd been jailbait, exactly why he'd remained hands-off no matter how tempting she was.

If he'd only heeded his gut when something felt off that fateful day the head of security had come down sick, along with another, leaving Rio to escort Reed to New

York alone. But no, as soon as he expressed concern, Governor Reed had stressed how important the fundraiser was and said everything would be fine.

If Rio had stuck to his guns, insisted they disembark while he checked things over, the governor and his wife, not to mention the flight crew, would still be alive.

Juliana would have her parents.

She wouldn't be stranded with a handsome stranger.

Damn! And there he went again...

Right now she was angry at him. He had to fix that and fast. Cord might have several days on him, but Rio suspected that he had Juliana's heart. At the least, he had a decade of desire over Cord.

He intended to use that to his full advantage.

By the time he reached his house, all Rio wanted was two things—a cold brewski and a miracle. Somehow, he had to convince the Carvers to close before Thursday so he could get back to Juliana.

Leaving his dead cell phone on the counter to recharge, Rio grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge then plopped on the couch and flicked on his television. As always, it was set to Juliana's station. Some game show was on. He took a cold swallow and basked in pure satisfaction as the icy liquid went down his throat, straight to his gut and mellowed his mind. It would all work out. It had to.

His TiVo automatically recorded Channel 5's daily broadcasts. *Not stalking*, he told himself, just keeping tabs on her. Her street reports often aired during the headlines. The station saved her in-depth work for their weekend broadcasts.

Finger on the fast-forward button, Rio took another swig and almost choked when Juliana's face flashed across the screen first thing. *Shit*. He tapped rewind then play.

"It's with a heavy heart that we tell you Juli Reed, a familiar face here at WBF, has apparently been kidnapped. She was last seen late Sunday night at a station party celebrating her McDowell Award for exposing recent KKK practices in Maryland," the anchorman reported, attempting to look unaffected but Rio saw the lines of concern tugging at his face, heard the sadness in his voice. "Police are investigating the possibility that the KKK may have been involved in her disappearance."

A picture of a vehicle took up the entire screen. "Early this morning, a witness came forward. They saw a masked man force Ms. Reed into a black SUV, similar to this one. Please, if you have any information at all, call the police or the station at the number on your screen. In other news..."

*Holy shit*. Someone had seen him.

The ring of his home phone cut through his dread. Distracted, Rio hit mute and reached over to pick it up. His eyes stayed glued on the tube. "Rio Tarin, at your service."

"Rio, buddy, I said *talk* to her."

Oh damn. Tom.

His friend wasn't stupid, but Rio chose to play stupid. "What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about?" Tom sounded a little pissed. "*I'm* talking about the fact I tell you to get Juli to lay off, you book it from my house and next thing I know, a vehicle matching yours is identified in her kidnapping. *Kidnapping.*"

Actually, he sounded more than a little pissed. A whole lot pissed. "I've left umpteen messages on your cell since the witness showed up this morning, practically identifying your vehicle. *Your* vehicle, Rio. Dammit, man, the only reason I wasn't panicked is that your receptionist said you were with important clients all day. Now *you* start talking."

"I thought...thought the KKK was suspect." Rio stumbled over his words, knowing Tom better than to think he'd fool him for a second, but still...hopeful.

"Yesterday's news. Where you been...better yet, *where is she?*"

"You said to get her out of the way," Rio admitted.

"I didn't say to kidnap her! Jesus, Rio, bring her home. Now."

"Can't do that." Rio cleared his throat, stalling. "There's something you don't know."

But what?

Tom was a cop, but not a dirty one. Rio couldn't expect Tom to cover his ass, given how irrationally he'd acted. Not that he'd change taking Juliana on his life. She was too smart for her own good and she needed a man to protect her.

"I don't like where this is heading." Tom sounded exasperated. "You know I can't keep this information to myself. Bring her back or I'm going to have to turn you in."

"Juliana and I are lovers," Rio blurted.

"What? Since when?" Tom hacked a cough. Rio couldn't tell if it was in disbelief or from a recently lit cigarette. "Details, man."

"She, uh, wanted us to keep it quiet, for her career." His hole just kept growing deeper and deeper. "Single is sexier, apparently."

"Uh-huh. If you're lovers, why'd you have to put on a mask and kidnap her?"

Crap. "Now that's a recent development."

"No shit," Tom chuckled. "Recent as in you seduced her in the last two nights?"

"You wanted her out of the way, or did I read you wrong?"

"Sure but—"

"She's out of the way and she's staying willingly at one of my properties. It took some *convincing*, but she's seen reason. You have the Benitos all to yourself, if you act quick. That's what you wanted, isn't it? To keep her from interfering, winding up dead?"

"She's alone?"

"And staying put. Willingly, like I said." *Just keep digging, Rio.* "As soon as I take care of some important clients, I'm returning to her. We're going to vacation a bit, stay clear of DC until you settle your case and it's safe for her to return. That's it."

"Okay. So you're screwin' her." Another cough. "I'm proud of you, buddy. But that doesn't change the fact there's a missing persons report out on her. Her coworkers are going ape-shit on this one. Trying to dig up what they can instead of letting us do our job. A job you're hampering, I might add."

"As long as they're all over the place looking for her, the bad guys likely aren't. You'd be doing yourself and your case a big favor if you just kept this conversation to yourself. It's only a few days, right? You said that you were closing in on Tito, so do it."

Tom huffed a sigh. "Have her call me. If I can talk to her, get confirmation that she's fine..."

Shit. Have her call? How the hell would he manage that? The moment she got on the phone she'd be screaming for help. "That might take a bit of doing. There's no cell coverage out there. She's fine though. You've got my word on that."

Tom was silent a moment, no doubt weighing his options and Rio's story. They'd known each other a long time.

Long enough that Tom knew Rio wouldn't lie to him. Shit. And what had he been doing for the last five minutes? Lying his ass off. He pressed his advantage. "If she comes back now, we both know she'll continue her investigation with a vengeance. That can't be good for your case. I promise, she's safe. And happy." She'd certainly looked happy, gazing up at Cord.

"Because there's an official investigation, I need to hear that straight from her."

"Sure. Just give me a few days, a week at most."

He'd need every last moment to convince her. To seduce her in truth. It'd take as much to get her to agree to call Tom without screaming bloody murder.

"A week? You've got two days. Three max. And don't make me regret giving you that much."

"You won't, I swear," Rio vowed. "Look, I gotta run. Dinner's getting cold."

"Keep me informed," Tom stressed.

"Will do. *Adios.*" Rio hung up, wishing he did have dinner.

What a complicated task he had ahead of him. Complicated even more by several living, breathing obstacles—Juliana and her pride and Cord.

But Rio would make her see his side of things. No matter how much rope and sex and convincing it took. He'd go as far as he had to, so long as the outcome resulted in Juliana safe and sound and in *his* arms.

She'd probably fight him every step of the way. But it would be okay, it had to be...no matter how long it took him to return to Virginia.

Cord might not know him from Adam, but Juliana would know he hadn't abandoned her. She'd know he was coming back.

*You'll return, huh? Just like you did the last time?*  
Goddammit. Okay, maybe not.

## Chapter Twelve

After the most satisfying night—and morning—Juli woke to the hot sun on her face and the sound of cardinals whistling in the distance. She squinted at the open window and luxuriated in the warmth and unexpected sounds of nature.

Sleeping in the afternoon had never felt so great. Of course, anything was great after great sex.

And she and Cord had enjoyed plenty of that.

He'd kissed her goodbye a while ago and climbed from the bed, encouraging her to sleep more. Which she had. It was either that or face another day without styling products.

After all, styling products were a girl's best friend and Juli had already taken stock—several times.

No gel, no mousse, no curling iron. *No hope.*

Untamable and unstoppable, her hair felt as if a hurricane had blown through and swept some animal atop it.

An animal that had climbed up and died.

Used to being polished to perfection every time she stepped foot outside her apartment—a habit born from being in the public eye—Juli was finding the only time she wasn't obsessing about how she looked was when she was obsessing about Cord or a certain risen-from-the-dead Latino not-quite lover who shall remain nameless.

And what did he matter anyway? The only person she needed to satisfy was herself. And the man downstairs certainly satisfied. Running her fingers through the tangled mess, Juli reminded herself to ask Cord for a rubber band, a twist tie—a clothespin—anything, that she could pull her hair back with.

When she sat up, the fabric of Cord's flannel shirt billowed around her. Bunching her hands in the cuffs, she brought them to her nose and inhaled. His unique scent saturated her nostrils. Hay, fresh air and man. A hint of smoked wood. Damn, she loved his fragrance. Almost as much as—

No! She refused to think of anyone but Cord. A pair of his waffle-knit long johns clung to her legs and hips, leaving her toasty warm even without a fire in the grate.

She'd never been so dressed down. So comfortable.

So heartbroken. Some time during the early morning hours after they'd returned from stargazing, she'd finally clicked with what made Cord seem familiar—the report she did on post-traumatic stress disorder.

The nightmares, the flashbacks. The way he avoided talking about his past. The way his temper flared, as it had when he'd discovered a third leak after hosing off the roof earlier. Not that Juli feared him—Cord was too gentle to hurt a fly, but that keyed-up behavior, combined with everything else...he was a slam dunk for PTSD and he needed help. As in professional help—counseling, meds—not sex.

Juli started to roll from the bed then noticed a pair of women's slippers on the hardwood floor. Faded pink terrycloth, a rose embroidered over the toe box. With a smile, she picked them up. His grandmother's, she bet.

Cord was one of a kind. Hard yet soft. Dark yet light. A gentleman who wasn't at all gentle. She almost wished she didn't have to leave him.

But she did. She had to get home and get back to work. *Away from Rio.*

Like a bee outside the window, thoughts of him kept buzzing around her brain. Juli swatted at her head. "Go 'way."

Slipping her feet into smashed-down padding, Juli stood. Once dark settled tonight, she'd escape. She had to. But judging from the scents wafting past the door, Cord was making dinner and the gnawing hollow in her stomach took precedence.

The extent of her culinary skills typically involved takeout or taking it out of the box. A man who drew baths and cooked? If she wasn't under house arrest, she'd be in heaven. Thinking of her jailer's unique talents, Juli gave the bed one last fond look and exited the room. "That better be salad I smell cooking!"

"Salad doesn't smell, sleepyhead," he hollered from below. "And last I checked, you don't cook it!"

"When your name is Juli Reed, you do!" She made her way around the banister and sped down the stairs. He met her at the bottom, clad in a sauce-splattered apron. Without hesitation, he pulled her off the lowest step and into his arms.

"You're going to stain this shirt!" she protested when he hugged her flush against his chest. Cord's eyes broadcasted his appreciation as he stared at her, holding her feet off the ground.

"I'm getting you dirty? A shame. We might have to take another bath," he murmured, his lips hovering over hers. "I'd thought you'd be impressed I scrounged up something other than berries and fish. Kiss me, darlin'?"

As though there were any question? She might be acting the tramp, but she didn't feel that way, not at all. There was something magical about Willow Creek—about Cord. Too bad she wouldn't be able to enjoy either the property or him for much longer. "Anytime, soldier."

Their bodies ground against each other as he claimed her mouth in an open kiss, licking her lips, stroking her tongue with his. The embrace was deep and hungry.

And filled with spices.

She licked her lips when he pulled away. "Oh yummy. Garlic."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." He winked and put her on her feet, ushering her down the hall.

Troubled as he was, he had this strange way of making her feel giddy and alive inside. "Most people wouldn't debate that."

"You don't like garlic?"

"Actually, I love it." She tasted her lips again. It wasn't just garlic but something full of flavor and delicious. "Even on your breath."

"Good because I'm making us something special."

"Fish served in bed this morning. Blackberries for lunch. And now something special...containing garlic? Heck, throw in a couple scoops of ice cream and by the time I get home, my hips won't fit across the TV screen."

And Rio had gone for supplies? Why? She certainly wasn't starving.

What a lame excuse.

Just one more reason for her to be angry with him. He'd carted her out here to soothe his own ego then selfishly abandoned her.

His mistake though, because whenever he finally roused himself and made the effort to come back she'd be gone. Long gone. She certainly had no intention of waiting around for him to return and make her suffer more of his unique brand of torture. Rio wasn't the man she'd imagined as a teenager—the hero. A hero would never have let her mourn him for ten years.

Juli stumbled and pretended to check out a watercolor that decorated the cracked wall of the dining area, not wanting Cord to see the tears that threatened her eyes. The way her jaw shook.

Damn Rio! *Damn him!* Damn the power he had over her heart. The way she couldn't shake him from her soul.

"Are you kidding?" Cord stroked his hand over her hip. "You could use some meat on your bones."

"Oh, so now I'm too skinny?" She couldn't hide the bitterness. She'd lost her good mood. "You weren't complaining last night or this morning."

"You're gorgeous." He delivered a swift smack to her behind. "I'm just not the type of man to complain about added curves."

"Fair enough. Oh, I keep meaning to ask you—do you have any rubber bands?"

"Why?" He started nibbling the back of her neck.

"My hair," she said on a gasp. "Need to...mmmm."

Cord gathered the strands and tugged sharply then he tongued the skin of her shoulder before whispering, "Nope, that's not allowed. Don't do a thing with this beautiful hair. I love it down. Love it."

He ended on a growl, and for once the frizzy mess didn't seem so...well, so *messy*. Juli scooted out from beneath his tempting tongue, her scalp tingling.



Heck, maybe she should just ask him to take her against the wall and tell her brain to take a hike. Smiling at the thought and knowing she'd follow up on it later, Juli questioned, "To what do I owe your garlic breath and these red stains all over my shirt?"

Cord headed to the stove and she followed, leaning against the counter. A pot of bubbling spaghetti sauce splattered the aged goldenrod finish around the burner.

"Take a gander." He picked up a wooden spoon and stirred figure eights, swirling through the thick sauce. Chunks of tomatoes, mushrooms and green peppers rose to the top. "I found this earlier when I went searchin' for anything else Grandpop might have saved. For you, dear Juli, I opened the last jar of homemade spaghetti sauce stored in the basement. I'd seriously contemplated saving it for when I had some noodles and cheese but decided you were worth it."

"Noodles and cheese?" she laughed.

"Yep. Egg noodles and grated Monterey Jack. Best thing you've ever tasted this side of heaven." He shrugged, stirring a little faster. "Haven't had that meal in...I don't remember how long, but I decided it was appropriate to break open the jar. For you. I even pulled out the last of my Red Hots for dessert. After that, it's munching on berries or mint leaves."

Juli thought of the candy she'd seen in his duffel and battled down another twinge for going through his things...more than once. "The last ones, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am, and even though they're my most favorite treat in the world – next to your pussy," he added with a mock leer, "I decided you were worth sharing."

"I'm flattered." Her smile returned and she pushed Rio from her mind. She'd much rather think about the sweet man she was about to make love to. "And these slippers? Your grandmother's?"

"Yeah." Cupping his hand underneath it, Cord lifted the spoon to her lips. Juli took a tiny bite of the chunky sauce.

"Wow. That's got a kick to it. More." She took another taste from the spoon he held at her lips. "What'd you spike it with? Dame Devereux's?"

"Who?"

"Don't tell me you've never heard of Dame Devereux's Creole Creations? Her Flamin' Flavor Seasoning?"

"Spices from a jar? Them's fighting words, woman." His pride in the sauce was evident.

"Secret family recipe?"

"Caught. According to Nana, no one does Italian better than a Southerner." His voice snagged, but he tried to cover it with more banter. "My grandparents weren't afraid of peppers and your tongue will never forget it."

"It's obvious how much you cherish them," she said softly. "I'm sure they felt the same about you. Want to talk about it?"

He didn't answer, just returned the spoon to the bubbling pot, this time cutting through the contents with abrupt, jerky movements.

Juli looked at his face. His jaw was tight, muscles straining in his neck. If he'd meet her gaze, she knew his would be haunted again. They were a pair, weren't they? First her earlier bitterness over Rio, now Cord's sadness over his past. To lighten the mood, she commented, "I never can believe when people do that on TV—lick the spoon and put it back in the pot. I feel so naughty."

"I like you naughty." He shot her what almost constituted a grin. Not much, but it was something. His stirring motions hadn't calmed though.

"They raised me, you know," he answered finally, his voice filled with pain. "I never had a chance to say goodbye, not really. They both died while I was overseas. Only family I had left."

*How much did he hurt inside?*

Needing to somehow offer comfort, Juli touched his arm, halting the frantic stirring motions. "I imagine it's not easy to let go."

"I'm learning." Dropping the spoon, he turned and stared down at her with shining eyes. His hands gripped her shoulders, his fingers digging in. "And you're helping."

Surprised, she stared up at him. "How?"

"By making me feel again. With this." His mouth crushed hers, sweeping her into a demanding kiss. His tongue dove inside her mouth, sliding against hers as he held tight.

Just as quickly, he moaned and pulled away, stared into her eyes. Breathing heavily, he returned for more. "Oh God, Juli," Cord murmured, kissing along her jawline, taking tiny little nips that hurt so good. "Juli, I think I'm falling in lo—"

She wrenched away, shocked. Flattered. "Stop. You don't mean that."

She put her fingers over his lips when he would have spoken again. This couldn't be happening. It was impossible. Both what he'd almost said and how the knowledge filled her with ecstatic warmth. And fear. "You can't. You're just reacting to being home again, the pressure, the knowledge that your home's been sold out from under you. The knowledge that I'm supposedly a hunted woman. There's nothing else—"

"None of that changes how I feel when I'm with you. I know my own heart, dammit—"

"Well, I know your cock," she insisted, running her hand down the front of his fly, refusing to acknowledge the emotions swarming inside her. "It's just the stress and strangeness of the situation. That's all. It's affecting you. Affecting me." She glared at him, daring him to contradict her. Juli's chest felt tight. Her lungs ready to burst. He opened his mouth and she cut him off again. "We *aren't* developing feelings, okay?"

"We aren't." Was he agreeing with her or asking her?

She couldn't tell by his tone. "Darn you, Cord." She raked her nails down his jeans harder, becoming more turned-on by the second. "Are you patronizing me?"

He threaded his fingers through her hair and grabbed a handful. "It's easier to agree than to argue."

That still wasn't an answer. And she could tell by the look on his face this topic was anything but over. "Fine then. We aren't."

"Fine!" he growled, nibbling at her chin, edging around her mouth. "Now kiss me."

Her tongue darted out, flicking against his exploring lips, even as she held on to her protests. "But seriously, we—"

"I mean it." He pulled her head back sharply. The sting on her scalp felt delicious. "Quit arguing with me."

"Mean what?" She had the willpower of a weak-willed worm, felt as though she'd agree to anything when he had his hands on her.

"I meant what I said." Cord released her hair and his fingers dove beneath her shirt until he was squeezing her breasts, punctuating his words with little pinches to her nipples. "I don't care if you think it's the situation, it's not." Pinch. "It's you. Me." Pinch, pinch. "I'm falling for you, darlin', and I don't know what to do about it anymore." *Pinch and roll.* "Not sure that I want to."

"Cord." His name was a whispered groan. She could feel his hurt, feel her own rising desire, but that wasn't why she said, "Take me."

She wanted him slamming into her again. Making her forget the mess *her* life was in. Making her forget... "Take me now."

Growling, he gripped her waist and hoisted her onto the counter. The wooden spoon clattered to the floor as her ass cheeks caught the edge. "Whoa!"

"Whoa, nothin'." With a fierce tug he pulled the long johns out from under her and spread her legs, dipping two fingers into her wet pussy. "Are you sure you want it like this?"

"Are you kidding?" Juli squirmed against him, clutching at his fingers with her slick sheath. "I'm past hot for you. I'm boiling for you, like your sauce."

His fingers withdrew and played with her clit, teased it from its hood. "Yeah, it is hot down here, darlin', mighty hot," he said with a hitch in his voice. "But not nearly hot enough. Bet I can fix that though..."

"Sounding confident there, Cordell." His thumbnail tweaked her clit and Juli caught her breath, shifting her pelvis forward. "I'm ready already. Take me!"

After edging his nail lower and thrusting his entire thumb inside her slit to taunt her further, he pulled his hand free and let it hover over the pot of spaghetti sauce. His eyes locked with hers.

"You wouldn't," she dared, not sure whether she wanted him to or needed him to.

"I surely would." Grinning, he dipped four fingers into the simmering sauce and scooped, returning between her legs an instant later to smear the dripping sauce over her upper thighs.

"Oh God. *You did.*"

The hot liquid stung, but only made her juices run thicker when Cord moved in to lick it off.

"Mmmm." His tongue slid between her legs, his prickly beard tickling the sensitized skin of her thighs. Juli arched her back, fighting the urge to wiggle, wanting more...

Like his tongue, deep inside her. Better yet, his cock. Long, hard and pounding away her every problem in quick rhythmic strokes. He was the chef this evening and tonight, Juli was made to order. *Order up!*

"Cord, quit playing around." Knotting her fingers in his hair, she attempted to guide that delicious mouth of his to her pussy. "Dinner is served."

"I'll show you playin'." Cord's tongue swiped past the remaining sauce and dove between her labia, circling her clit then retreating. Hands on her thighs, he wrenched her from the counter in one clumsy *whoosh* and bent at his knees, supporting her weight.

Reaching between them, Juli fumbled with the fly of his jeans, releasing the beast. Once his cock was freed, she moved against the hard, angled shaft, throwing her head back as he nudged her pussy, teasing her mercilessly.

"Don't you understand the meaning of 'take me'?" Juli demanded. "*Take me now, dammit.*"

"Patience, darlin'." With one hand he cradled her, with the other he reached around and dug in his back pocket. A moment later, his pants were around his knees and he was rolling on a condom.

Protection? She'd forgotten all about it, too busy rubbing herself against his beautiful curved cock, craving it. Several times they'd been together, but not like this. Not so frantically, where she completely lost her head.

"Hurry up." Juli wasn't sure whether it was the sauce or the hunger gnawing in her gut—her cunt—but... "You're. Taking. Too. Damn. Long!"

"Think so, eh? Well, take *this*." Fast and filling, his cock stretched her to the limit, his length reaching deep, forcing her to accommodate him, driving her to the edge.

Juli nuzzled her face in his neck, biting flesh, gripping him with her need, unaccountably worried that Rio still wasn't back yet and hating him for making her think about *him* when her mind should be focused elsewhere. On... "*Cord! Harder, dammit, until we both stop thinking.*"

He fucked her fierce and fast, desperately ramming her body against the cabinets. Taking what he needed. Giving what she craved.

She needed him inside her. Loving her. Erasing the memory of Rio. Of every blasted night she'd spent crying over his death, her parents' deaths. Of every dream she'd wasted on that bastard, thinking him *dead*.

Even now he was there, plaguing her mind. Breaking her heart.

She was fucking another man, a man she inexplicably cared about, but Rio was still there, memories of his mouth on her pussy, his cock in her face, fantasies of the sex they'd never had. Pushing her to the brink of orgasm. Making her cry out as heat exploded, as her body convulsed and her lover jerked with his own completion.

It was over too fast, but for once she wasn't sorry.

She only regretted that she'd come while thinking of Rio. Not Cord. Not the man her mind and heart wanted, but the one her soul demanded.

Juli blinked away tears even as she laughed. It was all she had left. Laugh. Love. Live.

She just couldn't take any more pain, any more regret.

She swallowed, willing the rush of feelings to dissipate. "So, soldier, tell me how you eat spaghetti sauce without noodles and cheese."

"With a spoon."

Cord finally stilled inside her, his breath haggard, face smiling. More laughter. Just what she needed. He growled when her pussy clenched around him. "I sure am likin' this no-panties thing."

"I'll bet you are."

"I'm gonna have to thank Rio for droppin' you off in this condition."

"You thank him, you're lunchmeat." She tossed her hair out of her face. Rio again. She just couldn't get away from him, could she? "What does he have to do with my panties...?"

"That's what I'm wantin' to know."

"Nothing. Absolutely positively nothing. *Ever.*" Her legs curved around Cord's waist, she hugged his torso and pointed to the floor. "Now hand me that spoon, stud, I have some sauce to eat."



The man walked up to the house, swung open the unlocked door and disappeared inside. Wasn't in there two farts before he came back out, empty-handed and in a rush. He roared off a second—and one hell of an ass-gusher—later. But not before Diablo wrote down his plates.

Lucky bastard. He'd have followed Mr. Tarin from Rio Grande Properties, learned what he knew and taken him out, but it was high time Diablo found a bathroom. Maybe a doctor.

Death could wait, his bowels couldn't.

## Chapter Fourteen

A cool wind blew in through the open window as Juli rested against the wooden sill, pathetically attempting to read Cord's journal again, this time by the blue-white glow of moonlight that shimmered over the pages. After the seductively scrumptious supper of sauce, sauce and more sauce—every time one of them complained about no noodles or cheese, the other fed them a slurpy bite from their own spoon, followed by a kiss—they'd retired upstairs.

Juli had justified herself, saying that the more she could tucker Cord out, the more likely he'd sleep through the night after she slipped away. But her initial plans went awry because shortly after she feigned sleep, which required a darn good acting job on her part given how restless Cord was, he climbed from the bed, tugged on his jeans and exited the room.

Curious, she'd followed and watched from the shadows while he quietly let himself out the kitchen door and headed toward the outbuildings. A few seconds later a light went on in one of the barns, but instead of dressing and figuring out the best way to leave, somehow Juli found herself back upstairs with his journal in hand, devouring every word she could make out.

It hadn't escaped her notice that Cord had left the bedroom door unlocked and wide open. Was that because he truly thought she'd sleep through the night? Or because he trusted her not to leave?

Yeah, she was trustworthy all right, Juli thought, angling the journal to get a better look. She just couldn't seem to help herself. The demons who haunted Cord called to her as much as one of her investigative exposés. Why was she so driven to help him? Why wasn't she running through the woods even now?

*You should be!*

But she didn't want to. If she disappeared without a word it would hurt Cord and he didn't deserve that. And if she told him she was leaving, he'd stop her. She knew it. What was keeping a resisting woman around for a few days—especially when said woman was eager to spread her legs—in exchange for receiving the deed to hundreds of acres? Of course Cord would do everything within his power to keep Juli safe.

*Safe? Prisoner, more like, her intellect protested.*

*Willing prisoner and sex-slave, her body insisted.*

"Shut up," she whispered, turning the page. An envelope fell free. She held it up to the light. Georgia postmark and very feminine handwriting, addressed to Specialist Cordell Ramsey. Hmmm. Juli raised the envelope to her nose and sniffed.



Faint, but still present. Someone had definitely doused the letter with perfume before sending it to Cord. Not sure how she felt about that, Juli studied the postmark again. The letter was years old. But he had to have kept it for a reason. Everything in her wanted to open it and read what R. Wells of Savannah, GA, had to say to Cord.

But she wouldn't. There were some lines not to be crossed. Reading a journal should probably be one of them, but Juli could justify that on the basis of being stranded with a stranger and needing to know what made him tick.

Reluctantly, Juli put the letter back and thumbed through the journal until reaching more familiar territory. Rereading the passage she'd practically memorized, her heart broke all over again.

*Chuck said to quit bitchin' about the sarge's death. War is war.*

*But I can't help but wonder...what if I'd reacted sooner? Done something different? Was that girl's life worth Sarge's? One thing is for sure, I don't deserve to make it home.*

"Yes, you do," she whispered. "You do. Why can't you see that?"

*I don't deserve to make it home.*

That was it.

Her fingers crept over the page and Juli closed her eyes. She could feel his pain and knew she could give him pleasure, help him forget. Make him happy if just for a few hours. She wanted to with all her heart.

But she couldn't. Not anymore. She had to quit fooling herself.

Loads of satisfying sex, even when it was vastly overdue, didn't make up for acting stupid. She was becoming too wrapped up in Cord and how he made her feel...cherished and secure, and how she wanted to make him feel—loved and at peace. Stupid, Juli! Stupid.

Two full days she'd hung out, making love with him when she should have been planning her escape. And been long gone already.

Sighing, Juli closed his journal and snuck the book back inside his duffel on the closet floor. When she straightened, she saw a couple jackets hanging from the rod. Cord's? Or his grandfather's?

Unease stirred through her, but Juli ignored it, pulling the first jacket off its hanger and slipping it on over the flannel shirt she wore. Guilty conscience or not, she had to think smart. From the little he'd shared, she knew she had quite a hike in front of her. What she wouldn't give for a pair of real shoes. Her choices had dwindled down to stealing a pair of Cord's boots and stuffing socks in the toes—which she couldn't bring herself to do—or keeping the slippers he'd loaned her. Pathetic.

Not that she was proud of it, but Juli had filched a lot worse during the course of her job and in the name of seeking justice. So why was she feeling so damn horrible for borrowing a stupid jacket and the decades-old pair of slippers?

No matter how much she wished differently, it was time to go. Maybe she'd come back to Cord one day in the not-too-distant future when things had a chance to be right,

to be real between them, without Rio's threats shadowing them. Come back to the peace and security Cord offered. She'd like that. A lot.

Juli zipped the jacket up to her chin then fished her watch out from under the mattress. Grabbing her purse, she stuffed the watch inside and determinedly began her escape, shaking off the surprising emotion that gripped her at the thought of leaving.

For all she knew, Rio would return in the morning and she better get a move on if she expected to sneak past Cord and slip into the woods. Who knew how much longer he'd stay outside?

Juli made her way down the stairs and exited out the front door. The night felt oppressive, the cool, moist air closing in around her, magnifying the guilt she felt at betraying Cord.

Dingy light spilled out from the bottom-floor windows. Between that and the bluish glow from the night sky, Juli headed in the direction of the dirt drive, away from the outbuildings and Cord, feeling every little rock and dirt clod under the thin soles of the slippers.

The tall trees shivered in the eerie nighttime breeze; Juli followed suit. Crickets chirped loud enough to raise the dead and the high-pitched sound grated on her nerves. She crossed her arms in front of her, determined to stop trembling and turned around, walking backward a few steps, keeping sight of the comforting old house as long as possible.

There was something about the plantation that called to her. Spoke to her soul. Something she had to ignore. At least for now.

Knowing that leaving was the right decision—the only decision—Juli turned and started skip-jogging down the drive, toward freedom. Come tomorrow night, she'd be back in—

A horrendous wail pierced through her thoughts.

Pain-filled and desperate. And masculine, definitely masculine.

*Cord?*

Her feet stumbled to a halt. Juli glanced in the direction of the barns then back at the shadowed drive.

Cord? Or escape?

The choice was easy. She raced toward the sound, not slowing until she neared the weathered building where she paused to catch her breath, weigh her options.

Another scream filled the air, this one full of anger. If she didn't know better, she'd think someone was being murdered in there. Meeting their maker just beyond the wall.

*Damn.* She swallowed the gruesome thought.

What was going on?

Heart clamoring, Juli approached the barn door but the closer she came, the more her footsteps slowed until her hand rested on the cold metal handle. But instead of opening it and discovering answers or offering comfort, an invisible wall held her back.

She tried to breathe through the ache in her chest as she listened to the muted cries coming from beyond the door. With every angry howl he uttered, a vise clamped tighter around her heart.

Cord was in pain and all she had to do was choose between saving herself or saving him. Abandon her desire to flee.

Not be selfish.

*Killed my sarge today...*

No matter that her feet had made the decision for her, Juli couldn't bring herself to take the final step and go inside. The last time she'd heard cries like that, she'd been seventeen and she'd screamed them herself. They'd echoed in her mind longer than she wanted to admit. She was afraid to know what was causing Cord to feel such pain.

*But she had to.*

Golden light shimmered through a large crack in the worn plank to her side. Juli stepped toward the opening and braced her hands against the rough wood. She peered through the opening. Two hanging lanterns illuminated one side of the barn. Cord was about ten feet away, glaring bullets at a partially fashioned baby cradle.

Sweat glistened on his face. Or maybe it was tears trailing down his cheeks. He looked crazed, his eye sockets wide, staring at the cradle, his every muscle taut.

Oh no! Had he lost a child?

Cord picked up an axe and swung at the heirloom piece. The blade hit with a sharp crack. Juli jumped at the sound, her heart kicking into high gear, blood racing through her veins.

"Why?" Cord's bellow blasted her eardrums. He brought the axe down again. "Dear God, why?"

He threw the axe to the side and fell to his knees. Yellowed sticks of hay jumped in the air and Juli saw that the ground was littered with money. Paper bills that Cord gripped in his fists, ground into the dirt.

Where had all that cash come from?

His body heaved as he cried out. "I want to know why! *Why?* I did it for you!" Cord picked up a handful of cash, his voice anguished. "I did it for you, Grandpop. I killed for you. For this!"

Cord ripped the money as though it were trash. "Fuck it," he muttered, running a hand over his face and tearing into the bills with his teeth. "Worthless. Stupid fucking money is worthless!"

He spit the bills out and tunneled his fingers through the hay, scattering the torn pieces. Then he started slamming his fists into the ground. One after the other, harder and harder. Over and over until she was afraid he'd break a bone. This was madness.

"Stop it!"

The ache in her throat told her she'd yelled the words out loud. Crap. She froze, but too late. Cord's gaze darted to the plank she hid behind.

Juli stepped to the side and drew a deep breath. Should she go in? Try to help him?  
No.

No, she couldn't. She had her own problems and it was beyond obvious Cord had his. She couldn't fix him. He needed counseling, not sex.

*Not just sex. Love.*

No! She didn't love him. Couldn't! It was too soon, too fast. Not based on the right reasons.

A sob caught in her throat. She didn't *want* to love. Not any man. Not anyone.

But there the feeling was. Strong and demanding.

Tearing her up inside.

She couldn't contain her gasp of surprise. In a panic, she whirled around and took off running.

The barn door slammed open and footsteps pounded after her. "Juli! Wait!"

She ran faster, pushed harder. She had to escape. She was becoming too caught up, wrapped around a situation that she had absolutely no business in. She needed to get home. To get back to *her* life.

Just because her heart ached to see someone so capable in such pain and her body couldn't help but respond—because Cord was flat-out sexy as hell... Just because that tortured air that hung about him, invading his personal space whenever he lowered his guard reminded her of something she couldn't quite place...

None of those provided sufficient reason to jeopardize her own sanity by staying. No reason at all. That she'd even considered it showed how far off her game she'd traveled.

"Juli!" He was gaining on her, his voice, the pounding of his feet growing closer with every second. "I won't let you go! I can't!"

*No!*

Juli clutched her purse for dear life when Cord clamped a hand to her shoulder and dragged her to a halt. With screams of her own, she fought him, battling for her physical freedom, for her *emotional* freedom.

Her fists flew. She kicked. She cried out.

*No!* She had to get away. Tonight. Right now.

Before it was too late.

Rio thought her life was in danger? Well, Juli *knew* her heart was in danger. She cared about Cord more than was possible, but she couldn't stop thinking about Rio. Damn him! Damn them both!

"Juli. Calm down!" Cord blocked her blows, struggling to subdue her. "Let me explain!"

She just wanted to go home. To think about herself and only herself. Life had been great—she'd just won the McDowell, she'd narrowly escaped screwing a married

man—she'd been doing just fine! She didn't need Cord, didn't need Rio, didn't need any man interrupting her success.

Nothing good could come of it.

If what she felt for Rio, was starting to feel for Cord, was an example of how love felt, she didn't want any part of it. Didn't want to get caught up in any more heartbreak. Couldn't. She'd had enough pain and heartbreak by the time she was old enough to vote. Enough to last a lifetime.

Cord's hands caught her waist and he tossed her over his shoulder.

"Put me down!" Her voice was hoarse. She tasted salty tears on her lips.

Was she really crying? *Why?*

Cord wasn't her problem any more than she was Rio's. She had her own life. It was *hers*. She needed it to stay that way. Whenever she cared about someone, she lost them. Her parents, her friends, Rio...she was bound to lose Cord as well.

She struck her fists against his back, kicked at empty air, but there was no freeing herself from Cord's hold on her upper thighs. He hauled her back to the barn, taking her inside.

Feeling trapped, she sunk her teeth into his flesh and his bellow echoed off the wood walls. So it hurt? Tough shit. She fought harder and he dumped her on a stack of hay bales, clutching the damaged skin with his fingers. "Dammit, Juli! What's wrong with you?"

She jumped up and raced past him. He caught her and pushed her onto the hay-covered floor. Leaping on top of her, he pinned her down. "Listen! I can explain."

"I don't want to!" she wailed. "Leave me alone!"

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he ground out. "But at least let me explain."

"I don't care. It doesn't matter," she spat. "*You* don't matter!"

What was she saying? Why did she feel so frantic with the need to escape what was happening with Cord? With herself?

"I don't matter?" His expression turned to steel. "Just what were you doing outside?"

She didn't respond and his eyes narrowed to angry slits. He grabbed her purse and wrenched it from her grasp, tossing it toward the shadowed corner. "I guess I was wrong to trust you. Rio had a point."

Cord looked around, his attention darting everywhere until stalling. Juli followed his gaze, noticing the pile of discarded twine he focused in on.

"Don't you dare," she said automatically, denying the unexpected thrill that shot through her.

"Angel, you just fell from grace, trying to escape. So from now on, we'll do things Rio's way."

"No!" she cried, pushing against Cord's solid chest, bucking her hips against his. But she couldn't lift him off her, couldn't escape. Knew deep down she didn't really want to.

His hand flew out and he grabbed the thin rope. "I won't lose my home because of you." He circled both of her wrists with one hand, forcing her arms above her head. "I can't! Can't lose..." His voice cracked. "Again. I won't."

"No!" she screamed again, feeling the heat from his inner thighs as he straddled her pelvis, wanting to buck against him for an entirely different reason. "No!"

He ignored her.

Wrapping one piece of the coarse twine tight around her forearms, he drew it into a knot then moved down her body, subduing her restless legs.

"Leave me alone!" She tried to kick him but he snared her feet and secured them too. Her breathing was heavy, her anger blazing. "I hate you!" she screamed. "*Both* of you!"

"Hate's an awful harsh word," Cord said silkily, fire burning from his gaze. "Did you hate me earlier when you were making love to me?"

She didn't answer. Couldn't.

"Makes me wonder just how damn much you *hate* Rio too." His eyes hardened then his upper lip curled when she remained silent. "Guess I've been a fool."

It might not have been the best time for him to get primed for pussy, but his cock was as hard as the stone she'd turned his heart to with her words of hate. All he wanted to do was kiss Juli, fuck her until she wanted to stay. To be with him. *Only* him.

Cord wanted to shake her senseless, he was so frustrated. It was clear as the busted nose on his face she had feelings for Rio, no matter how angry she was at him for leaving her.

And that she wished both of them to the bottom of a very deep lake. With *their* ankles tied. And cemented. A sour grin came to his lips as he held her bound feet.

He hated, he *hurt*, that she wanted to run away. She'd betrayed him, betrayed what he thought was growing between them the past several days.

As soon as she screamed and he'd seen her through the crack in the wall, he'd known she'd witnessed something ugly, something monstrous in him. Hell, any woman in her right mind would've run just as Juli had.

But that didn't stop him from wishing *she'd* done differently.

"I was going to come back," Juli whispered, her head turned to the side so she didn't have to look at him. "Once Rio was off my back."

He didn't believe her.

"You running away isn't about us, Juli. Or me," he told her. "You know what this land means to me. It's my home, the only thing I have left in the world. Don't make me lose it."

She whimpered, closing her eyes as if she could shut him out.

"Dammit, don't you dare ignore me! Juli!" Cord seized the zipper of the coat she'd stolen from him and wrenched it open. Then he gripped both sides of her flannel shirt and ripped them apart from the bottom up, flinging buttons in all directions.

"I hate you!" she insisted, arching against him. "Hate you!"

"Like hell. You want me and you damn well know it." Cord stared at her exposed breasts, flushed pink with anger. Or arousal? He bent forward and attacked her left nipple with his mouth, suckling hard while pinching the other bud with his fingers.

He squeezed, twisted, demanded she *feel*. Need him.

"Please, Cord..." Her protest was weak. "I want you to stop."

Did she really? Then why was she moaning like a cat in heat? "Bullshit. You want it. Maybe even more than I do."

His teeth nipped her. He devoured her flesh, consuming as much of her as he could. No way would he let her go. Let her act as if he were nothing. As though *they* were nothing.

*Well, what could they be?* his conscience screamed. *When she has a thing for Rio?*

He refused to believe it. He wanted to make her his. Wanted her to stay.

To understand him.

Love him.

Was that what he wanted? Her love? How could he? They'd just met...

Impossible thoughts swirled through Cord's mind as his mouth loved her flesh. As he listened to every breathy exhalation she made, sounding like a woman enjoying her lover.

Yes!

Cock throbbing, he kissed her belly, and tore the coat and flannel shirt completely from her body, casting them to the hay-covered floor before jerking down the long johns that stood in the way of his mouth. Still no panties, praise God, and the sweet and tangy scent of her desire permeated the air. Her labia glistened before his very eyes, the short curls surrounding her cunt moistened with her desire. Beckoning him onward.

"Oh God. *Cord!*" she moaned his name again, no longer fighting but begging him.

So she liked it rough?

Hell, she was about to find out just how *rough* he was. He'd give her a reason to leave.

Then he could pretend it didn't hurt when she did.

Oh Lord. This was it.

She was losing herself to him.

A few moments ago she'd been fleeing. Now she couldn't even bring herself to protest. Didn't want to.

And how could she? She needed Cord to satisfy this deep ache inside her. To take away all the hurt and grief she'd kept buried for a decade. She needed him to make her forget Rio once and for all. But more than that, she *needed* him. Him!

Cord raised off her and stood then he hauled her to her feet. She wobbled but didn't fight him, not when he cursed and savagely commanded her to, "Stay still, dammit. And keep quiet," and cut through the rope at her ankles.

Not when he lifted her bodily off the floor, her bare feet freed – the slippers long since having disappeared – turned her around and pushed her facedown over a bale of hay, the individual pieces scratching at the bared skin of her breasts and stomach.

Not when he pulled the long johns completely off her legs and grabbed her ass in his hands, kneading, pulling her cheeks apart. She groaned, loving his brisk actions, loving how her arms were useless, leaving her at his mercy.

"Is this what we've come to, Juli?" His tone was like sandpaper, grating along her nerve endings, making her soft and weak. Kneeling, he kissed her dripping pussy, swiped his tongue along her length and then drove two fingers deep in her cunt, swirling them inside. "Do I have to *force* you to stay? To *make* you realize what you feel for me?"

"Nothing," she mumbled past the passion gripping her loins, protesting automatically. "I feel nothing. It's too soon."

"You feel, I know you do."

*God.* She buried her face in the sweet-smelling hay. "I don't want to."

"Why not?" he demanded, biting the right cheek of her ass. Paying her back? Or doing it to turn them both on? She moaned, wanting his mouth centered between her legs.

"Answer me, woman. What do you feel?" When she refused to respond, only squeezing his fingers tighter with her pussy muscles, he bit her other cheek. Harder. She cried out.

"That's for biting my shoulder." He nipped her thigh, only a fraction softer but still plenty hard enough to sting. "That's for me." Again, his teeth dug into her. "For us."

His fingers and mouth weren't enough...she needed his thick cock in her. Now.

She needed to forget.

"Screw me, Cord. Please."

"No!" He pulled his fingers from her pussy and dragged them up and over her anus, flicking the sensitive skin with his fingertips. Juli rocked her hips and he pushed past the tight ring of muscles. "Answer me! What are you feeling?"



Pleasure-pain shot through her. His finger pumped into her ass, stretching her. She found herself moving against him, lifting her bottom into the ruthless plunges, welcoming the discomfort, needing the pure, unadulterated *feeling* that possessed her.

"Just make me forget, Cord," she pleaded. "Please."

"I'll make you forget, *Juliana*. I'll make it so you can't think about anything but me. Inside you. Fucking you."

Withdrawing his fingers, he raked his nails over both cheeks of her ass then rubbed the tip of his cock along her pussy, smearing her sex cream up the crack to her anus. He stroked up and down, back and forth, torturing the puckered bud. Juli splayed her legs wide, even as her butt clenched. She couldn't help it. "Cord, *please*. I need you!"

Suddenly his cock was pressing into her ass, pushing past her defenses, demanding she open for him. Open *to* him.

Her fingers opened and closed, flexed frantically into the prickling hay. She needed something to hold on to. "Condom?" she gasped at the last second, overwhelmed by what he was doing, how she wanted it.

"Already on," he grunted.

He entered her an inch at a time, filling her with his cock, with himself. Juli pressed against him, wanting more. Wanting everything.

Only when Cord was fully seated did he start riding her, pumping slowly, *too* slowly. She writhed under him, lifting her hips, crying out. It wasn't enough. She needed something more. *Someone* more.

Her cunt ached, pulsed with emptiness.

"It's not enough!" she cried. "Give me more, Cord. Please!"

All the way in her now, he plunged faster, his hot breath blowing across her back.

"I'm giving it to you, darlin'...all I've got."

"God. I ache..." Her anus twitched around him. Her clit throbbed. No matter how she tried to think of the present moment, the man inside her, Juli couldn't stop thinking one single word. She clamped her lips together, refusing to voice the name that echoed in her mind, but her efforts were useless...

"Rio! Oh God, Rio!" The cry slipped from her before she could stop it.

Thoughts of him set her loins on fire, blazing with an orgasm, and she clenched Cord's cock with the muscles in her ass. Her cunt convulsed, empty, hungry to be fulfilled. If only Rio were underneath her, driving into her pussy while Cord took her from behind. There'd be no yearning, no terminal ache, only pleasure...

Ecstasy.

Completion.

She forced her hips back against Cord's groin, wishing she could make the desire go away. Wishing she could be free.

He lunged deeper and pain pierced through her haze of desire, bittersweet. Juli rocked with need. Need for Cord.

Need for Rio.

*Oh God...* What was wrong with her? She was angry, disgusted with Rio. She *wanted* Cord. She was falling in love with *Cord*.

So why couldn't she shake Rio from her mind?

God help her, she needed him. Both of them. So much so that she had to pretend the fantasy was real. She knew it was the only way she'd come.

"Cord." She tugged at her wrists, needing to touch him. To touch herself. "My hands, please."

"No. I won't let you go."

"Oh God," she panted. "But my pussy..."

Reaching around, he drove several fingers into her wet depths, hand-fucking her harshly. Making her body lurch with each plunge, taking him to the hilt in back and front.

Soon it was no longer his fingers, but Rio's cock pumping into her, driving her toward release. She rode both men hard as her sheath convulsed, her bottom contracted. Her mind spun, reality blurred, reason gone. She peaked and an orgasm slammed through her. Shudders racked her body from the inside out. Distantly, she felt the warmth of Cord's cum as he filled the condom and stilled, his cock pulsating deep within her.

His hand abandoned the needy spot between her legs and grasped her butt, squeezing.

Juli collapsed against the bale.

Her pussy was empty. Rio had vanished. Was never actually there.

And she was crazy for wanting him still.

"Feel privileged," she practically panted. Turning her face against the scratchy hay and spitting a piece off her bottom lip, she stared at Cord with one eye. Resolved to forget Rio once and for all, she spoke around the waves of emotion clogging her throat. "This isn't exactly something I let just anyone do, you know."

In fact, the only other time she'd allowed a man to enter her anally had been after months of dating and weeks of begging—on his part. But with Cord, a couple of great fucks, an episode or three of feeling sorry for him, and all her inhibitions were ground to sawdust. What was up with that?

And why, *why*, couldn't she stop imagining Rio doing the same thing?

## Chapter Fifteen

“God, Juli.”

What had he done?

Cord’s mind growled in rebellion and his fingers pressed into Juli’s lush flesh. He felt like a wild animal – hungry, caged and cornered. He’d do anything, *anything*...

But no way in hell would he let her leave him. Earning back his home was reason enough. Cord refused to contemplate why else keeping her with him seemed so vital.

Juli made a small sound, her breathing staggered. He knew she’d mumbled something, but his heart had been pounding too loud in his ears for him to make sense of her words.

Giving himself a moment, Cord took stock. His chest pressed along her sweat-dampened back, his forehead rested on her heaving shoulders. His saturated fingers were glued to her thighs, his cock shoved far up her ass. He should’ve long since pulled out, but the connection was too damn satisfying to relinquish.

The silence still rang with the name she’d cried out. Another man’s. But it was *his* erection that her ass was hugging, his body she’d desired.

Swearing under his breath, Cord slipped from Juli’s rectum, rolled the condom off, and refastened his jeans. It only took three tries. He shook with emotion, with passion. With the need to make Juli his. *Only* his. *Forever*.

Okay. He had lost his mind. Certifiably this time.

There was no way his brain was operating on all cylinders, if he could even contemplate such a thing after such a brief acquaintance. Oh, but he was. He could just picture the two of them working together to right Willow Creek, bringing the plantation back to its former glory, screwing and smiling all the while...

That wasn’t likely to happen now. If anything, he’d wager he’d just earned her hatred. He’d fucked her like nothing more than a damn caveman. No woman liked to be treated like that.

It was bad enough she wanted Rio, that she was calling out his name while Cord fucked her – and tonight hadn’t been the first time, whether she realized it or not.

But now Cord had given her every reason to truly hate him. To turn back to Rio completely. That was what he wanted, right? To scare her off?

Why? When he wanted her to stay more than anything? Dammit, he was screwed either way, messed up from here to eternity.

Emasculating tears threatened, emotion clogging his throat, but he swallowed it back and inhaled her essence, trying to distract himself. Juli smelled of lilacs, hay and dirty sex – a scent he wanted to smother himself in.

“Juli...” Feeling lower than vomit, Cord straightened, tossed the used condom in a corner of the barn – he’d burn it later – and turned to her. He placed his palm across her lower back. “Juli? Darlin’?” God, he was a dog. “I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

She didn’t answer but her whimper filled the air as she tugged at the twine binding her wrists.

*Shit.* That was all the answer he needed. He was a jerk. An asshole. The first damn woman he’d had in years and he took his fury out on her in the proverbial bedroom. He had no business thinking he could involve himself seriously with anyone.

Angrily, Cord dug in his pocket and pulled out the jackknife he carried. It was time to release her. He ought to let her go for real.

*I was going to come back.*

Had she been telling the truth? If he hadn’t stopped her, would she have escaped then eventually returned to him? He doubted it. Not after what she’d seen. Speaking of which...just exactly how much had she seen? Him crying like a damn baby? Seeing the cradle and note inside then finding the money? Going insane with rage?

No matter how much he *should* leave her alone, he couldn’t let her go, couldn’t risk losing the only home he’d ever known. *Losing her.*

Stepping to the side of the bale, he cut the rope binding her wrists, debating whether he needed to retie her ankles. “You gonna try and run again?”

“No,” she whispered as her arms flopped limply toward the floor. “I can’t.”

That was good enough for him.

He ran his fingers over the reddened, chafed skin of her arms. “Christ, I’m sorry.”

Juli rolled over, lifting her head to look at him. Her hair billowed around her face, loose and wild. Positively gorgeous. But surrounding a face filled with some emotion he couldn’t make out. He could see it, even past her big, glazed eyes, eyes that stared at him unblinking, brimming with a truth he didn’t want to recognize.

She licked her lips, but other than that, made no attempt to move. “No. I’m the one who should be apologizing,” she said so quietly he thought his mind might have conjured the words.

“I lost control. Lost my head.” He couldn’t look her in the face. Staring at the ground, he continued to stroke her arm. “I shouldn’t have taken you like that.”

“You’re apologizing *for the sex?*” Juli sat up and Cord saw how the hay had pricked the smooth skin of her breasts.

“Shouldn’t I be?” he asked, ashamed. He couldn’t stop himself from tracing one raised welt across the pale flesh. “God. I’m sorry. Deserve to be shot.”

Next thing he knew, she'd placed one palm against his stubble-covered cheek, gently guiding him to look her in the eyes. Doing so hurt. It was as if he were looking at everything, knowing he had nothing.

"No." A slight smile curled her lips and a blush rose to her cheeks. "I asked you to make me forget."

"But I didn't, did I?" Hard as he'd fucked her, it had still been Rio she'd cried out for.

"Apparently nothing can. I'm figuring that out." Moisture flooded her eyes and she blinked. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you stopped me from escaping."

"I would've run too." Standing and distancing himself, Cord kicked at the cash surrounding his boots. "You probably think I'm a lunatic."

"I think you need help." Her eyes settled on the cradle, her voice lowering. "Did you lose a child?"

"No." Cord shook his head. "Thank God, no." Walking to the cradle, he lightly touched the cracked wood, aware of the way Juli's eyes followed him. Expecting an explanation.

Could he give her the answers she wanted?

Clearing his throat, Cord investigated an ugly split in the wood where the axe had struck. "Grandpop was making this, evidently for the future," Cord said bitterly. Future? A splinter lodged in his thumb and he jerked his hand back. The sudden pain was just punishment. "Sorry I ruined it now. I'm just so damn angry at him."

"At your grandfather?" she asked, sounding surprised. "But I thought he was your world?"

Cord lifted his head from studying his thumb and cast Juli a look. Lantern light glowed off her body, illuminating her sincere concern.

How honest did he want to be? He returned his attention to prying the splinter out, but answered anyway. "Not just him. I'm angry at a lot of things. The war. The government. Myself." *Rio*.

"But what happened tonight?" she persisted. "Why did you react so...violently tonight?"

Fucking splinter. It could just stay in his thumb. He raised his head and stared at her, waving to the cash littering the floor. "Why do you think? All this useless, *useless* money."

He ground his heel into part of the stash, disgusted all over again. "I joined up for the paycheck with hopes of going to college after my tour was up. My sign-up bonus alone should've taken care of Grandpop and this place, not to mention my paychecks. Damn stubborn old coot. He stuck every red cent in a fuckin' cigar box and let everything go to shit." Cord's hands flexed into fists, itching to slam into the cradle and smash it to smithereens. "Damn his pride!"

"And yourself?" Juli whispered. "Why are you angry at yourself?"

He couldn't continue to hold back, couldn't contain the demons any longer. He hauled off, driving his fist into the side of the cradle. "I failed everyone! Everything!"

Pain radiated through his hand, through his heart.

"Your sergeant?"

Cord went still. What the hell did she know about that?

Whirling around, he stared at her. Their gazes collided. He could read her guilt, sense that she knew more about him than he'd ever revealed, ever suspected.

It suddenly came to him. She'd been locked in *his* bedroom when she first arrived. And there wasn't exactly a television or computer for entertainment. Nothing but...

"My journal. You read my goddamned fucking journal." His words were harsh but his tone lacked any heat. He shouldn't be surprised. Reporters like her were notorious for their persistence and damn nosy ways. Isn't that why they'd met in the first place?

No wonder she seemed to understand him so much. He took a step back, not knowing whether to be mad or embarrassed. Where the hell did she get off?

"I know I shouldn't have, but I did." Juli stood, closing the distance between them. She took his hand, easily freeing the splinter that had lodged in his knuckle with a pinch of her nails. "I'm sorry. Not for what I know, but for what you've gone through. I'm...sorry."

What did she know about being sorry? What did she really know about him, journal or not? "I thought that I'd come home in a casket. Sometimes, I wish I had."

"That's a horrible thing to say."

"Life's horrible," he shot back. "And then you die, sooner or later."

Silence loomed between them, tense and explosive. She dropped his hand and turned away, clearly disappointed with his response. Hell, he was disappointed with himself.

She took a step away from him then stopped, turning back around, her hand hovering between them as if she wanted to touch him. But she didn't. When she spoke, her voice was barely audible. "What happened that day in Iraq? Tell me."

"You don't want to hear it," he told her in a low growl. Needing a distraction, he knelt and began gathering the scattered, dusty money, putting the now-crumpled bills back in the cigar box, torn pieces and all.

"I need to know," Juli insisted. "More than that, you need to talk about it."

Cord swallowed. If she wanted to know about him so damn bad then she could hear it straight from his lips.

But she'd be sorry she asked.

"It was an IED—a bomb hidden in the carcass of a dead animal. A dog. I spotted it, called it, but too late. We were backing away when this Shi'ite girl ran into the road after her pet. She was crying its name, running toward the dog, but...but—" His voice wavered, so he finished in a rush. "I yelled for her to get back, but goddammit, she

wouldn't listen. I screamed at her to stop, but she kept running toward the dog, her little arms outstretched. I couldn't just let her die so I tore across the road after her, picked her up and threw her behind a truck, but the bomb had already been triggered."

The memory brought a rush of hot fury. His skin crawled, his heart slammed in his chest. "Sarge was hit with piece of shrapnel in the chest." His voice cracked with pain. "If I'd just followed protocol...left it alone..." *Let her die.* "Then Sarge would be alive."

"Cordell Ramsey, that's utter nonsense."

Just like Juli feeling responsible for her college boyfriend's overdose.

"You know, angel, you ought to take your own advice," he said, trying to redirect the conversation. Anything to get the focus off him and the remorse her simple words could never ease.

Juli dropped to her knees next to him and lifted his chin. "Listen to me! You don't control another's choices or destiny. Your sarge and all of the men and women serving with you knew the risks of signing up, but they did it anyway to protect their country, to fight for freedom. That's what you were doing, you know—fighting for freedom. That little girl's, just as much as our own."

Maybe. Somewhere along the way, he'd forgotten that.

Facing Juli, listening to her with his heart thumping so fast in his chest he could hardly breathe, attempting to hear past his own guilt, was one of the hardest things he done in months. Juli smoothed her hand over his cheek and down his neck. Tingles raced through him from the innocent touch and he found himself leaning closer to her, craving more.

"You did the right thing," she insisted. "The right thing."

"No one does the right thing in war."

"I think God would disagree. Your actions saved a child's life. That's never wrong."

Cord swallowed the knot thickening his throat and looked at her. He hadn't expected a comment like that to come from her. "You religious?"

"I went to church as a child." She dropped her hand and shrugged. "I'd go up in flames if I stepped in one now."

That surprised a laugh from him. "I doubt that. You're an angel. Don't think I've met anyone more heavenly." Hearing her talk about God, combined with the way she comforted him rather than being revolted, hell, he was blown away with her. She was so sweet, so damn caring...

"An angel? Perhaps in your eyes," she chuckled softly, returning her hands to his shoulders where she dug her fingers in. She was quiet for a minute, just staring at him.

*What did she see? A murderer?* He didn't think so. Just one helluva screwed-up former soldier. One who could lose himself in her body every day for the rest of his life. *If she'd let him.* "Juli...I..."

Her fingers tightened on his muscles. "Cord," she interrupted, "I really think you may have PTSD."

Blindsided, he was stunned silent.

"That's post-traumatic stress disorder," she practically spelled it out as if he were a moron, as if he hadn't already been told that by the staff shrink before his damn tour ended.

He tried to laugh it off. "Well, that's certainly a blow from left field, darlin'."

"I'm serious, but I'm not a psychiatrist. A couple years ago I did a report on soldiers returning from the war. The focus was PTSD. You remind me a lot of some of the servicemen and women I interviewed. I think you may have it too, but I *know* you need to see a counselor. Please. I don't like hearing you say you should have died. Over there or here. Cord, talk to someone."

"I'm talking to you right now." He stood, bringing Juli to her feet along with him. "And maybe I'll surprise us both and start talking to God again."

"I can't help you."

"It's not help I want from you. I just want you." He framed her face, held her gaze. "And I want you to want me. *Only* me."

She stared at him, looking a little bit lost and a lot forlorn. "I'd love to say that's what I want too because on some levels it is, but the truth is I don't know if that's possible."

"You really love him?" He had to ask, had to know.

Tears welled in her eyes again. This time they fell free. "It's not a choice."

The jolt to his heart was brutal. For a moment, Cord couldn't breathe. Why, dammit? *Why?*

Did he deserve no happiness? He was falling in love with her. He needed her.

And she needed someone else.

*Shit.* He nodded reluctantly. "Then I guess I'll just have to deal, won't I?"

"If you want me, then yes."

What choice did he have?

He'd be damned if he let anyone or anything take Juli from him. Just because she cared for someone else didn't mean she couldn't care for him. He'd share her heart if he had to, but he wouldn't willingly give her up. Not unless she chose to go. *After* he had his property back.

War hadn't killed him, but loving Juli just well might.

Crossing the barn, Cord picked up her purse from where he'd thrown it. "Your watch in here? Too wired to sleep, so I came out here to get the tools to fix it. Might as well."

Practically flying across the distance between them, Juli snatched the tiny bag from his hands. "Thanks, but you don't need to. It's old. I'll buy another."

"But —"



"I'd much rather you take me inside. Make me forget again." She slung the bag on her shoulder, latching her arm through his with a wink. "Perhaps do a little forgetting yourself."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lookie here. There're still handprints on the wall from when I was a kid." With knuckles and skin scraped from his outburst yesterday, Cord pointed to a waist-high smudge on the textured wall of the living room then turned to Juli grinning like the little boy who'd left it in the first place. "When I was growing up, I wasn't allowed to use the front door. For guests, Nana said, not mud-covered boys with frogs in their pockets. But I never listened...not a chance."

Cord chuckled, dipping the brush in the can of pinkish-purple paint he'd found in the barn and slapping it right on top of the smudge without even trying to clean it off first. "High time this place was painted. Nana would've liked this color." Slap, spread. Slap, slap. "I'm guessing she's the one who picked it out and that's why it never got used. 'Too girly', I can hear Grandpop saying."

After the nightmares he'd experienced again last night, seeing Cord this carefree was worth suffering the smell of paint, worth being away from home and missing all sorts of deadlines, even worth being inside on such a glorious day. And when was the last time she'd stopped to notice something as simple as a *nice day*?

Sitting on the floor because he'd shoved all the furniture to one side, Juli let the cool air blowing in through the busted windows whisper over her skin and smiled. Her eyes were receiving a treat too, she acknowledged, studying the flex of Cord's bare shoulder as he lifted the brush in long strokes, efficiently covering the wall.

He wore nothing but tattered blue jeans—the generic kind—and paint splattered his body, not to mention the faded denim.

What would he look like in real Levi's? The kind that buttoned in the front and cupped his tight ass in the back. Totally hot, no doubt. And didn't she sound like a teenager drooling over a crush? Juli chuckled to herself, thinking how one of these days, she'd love to see Cord all cleaned up. In a suit and tie with his hair trimmed.

Cord paused to evaluate a section of wall, running his free hand over his whisker-covered jaw.

*Shaven*, his cheeks smooth for once. Juli thought about the image then frowned at the picture. Something about it seemed wrong. Maybe she *didn't* want to see Cord all spiffed up. Too often along with the polish came the veneer. And she liked him just the way he was—real, honest. Ruggedly sexy.

*Just like Rio.*

Her heart skipped a beat at the thought. *Rio*.

He wasn't back yet, but he should've been. Days ago. What was taking him so long? Not that she cared.

Cord returned to his task, swiping the brush a little lower on the wall, causing the faded denim to mold to his thighs when he crouched. Forget the Levi's—Cord was eye candy as is—and all hers for the time being. Life with him was so sweet, she hadn't even missed her daily ice cream fix.

Juli stood, hooking her thumbs in the back pocket of the jeans Cord had loaned her. They were too big, but that just made them all the easier to get off.

Attempting to sound casual, she asked what she couldn't get off her mind. "You know, um, that girl who wrote you from Georgia?"

The brush didn't slow a whit. *Slap, slap.* "How do you know about—" His eyes sliced to her knowingly. "Oh. My journal."

"I saw her letter but I didn't open it, I promise. I just wondered if you ever wrote her back? Still keep in touch?" His posture stiffened, the brush fell to his side and she rushed to add, "I mean, was she special to you? *Is she?* Since you kept her letter all this time and, crap, now I wish I'd kept my mouth shut."

Cord straightened and backed away from the wall. He sauntered across the drop cloths and gave her a hug. "She's no one you need worry about."

But Juli was worried.

Why? She couldn't be jealous of the unknown girly-writing, perfume-wearing woman, could she? Defensive, Juli muttered, "That's no answer."

"She's just a kid. A pen pal." Cord patted her butt then released her, heading over to the paint can. "Her whole class wrote our unit. I forgot I even had that letter. Satisfied?"

She would be if she had some girly-smelling perfume. "I would be, if you'd let me paint—have an extra brush?" Either she'd gone crazy or Cord was so damn sexy he made menial labor look fun. But the surest way to get unwanted thoughts out of her mind was work. "I'll help cover up the sins of your childhood."

"Matter of fact, I do." Grinning, Cord pointed to a pile of supplies in the corner. "Right over there, darlin'. But don't feel obligated. I'm just pleased these ole cans of paint hadn't dried up. At least I'm doing something useful. Finally."

"Well...I want to try it."

"*Painting?*"

"Painting," she confirmed. She plucked a brush from the pile and braced her legs wide apart, crouching. "*En garde!*" Juli challenged, wielding the brush as if it were a sword. She jabbed at empty air. "Looks like fun."

"You think painting looks like fun? Wait a minute. Are you sayin' that you've *never* painted before?" Lifting his brows, he stared at her as if she were speaking a foreign language.

"Nope." Realizing how very unreporter-like she sounded, Juli corrected herself. "I've truly never painted. Show me how?"

"Please, woman, tell me you're kidding."

She wished she were. But she'd never painted. Never even watched someone else paint. Heck, she wasn't sure she'd ever gotten dirt under her nails before this week.

With every hour that passed in Cord's company, she was realizing just how much she hadn't done. By all accounts, Juli Reed was considered successful—she'd even made the citywide list of top eligible females the last two years, placing eighteenth and twelfth, respectively. That had been something to be proud of. Okay, so she was accomplished on the surface, but what about her life? Her childhood?

Every time Cord told her a story about his grandparents and growing up on the plantation—running through the fields, catching bugs, getting into heaps of trouble—she felt hollow inside. She didn't remember life being so magical and fun, only full of pressure, demands, responsibility—even in kindergarten. How many other five-year-olds had a driver take them to school and a tutor afterward?

And it had only grown worse with each year that passed. Until she turned fifteen and met her dad's latest securi— Juli felt Cord come up behind her and stopped the thought in its tracks.

Cord gripped her wrist and positioned himself along her back. She pressed her body against his. His cock was half hard, flush against her bottom, and she rotated her hips, feeling a flare of arousal quiver between her legs, curious how much painting was going to get done.

"Show me," she demanded with a giggle. "I promise to be a good student."

"But I like it when you're bad." Cord bit at her ear, sending sensations down her neck.

Juli arched, her very soul on fire. Desire rushed through veins, making her hot and tingly. Had she ever felt so very happy, so very *on*?

She might be his prisoner at the moment, but she felt freer than ever. She was having the time of her life with Cord. No need to look perfect, to speak perfect, to be a perfect lady. Wearing old blue jeans and eating berries for breakfast, spaghetti sauce for dinner one night, fish the next, felt damn good. She was even cussing like a sailor. Hell, she wasn't sure how she'd ever return to her old life. If she could.

"Like this," Cord murmured, forcing her knees to bend as they jointly crouched to load the brush with paint. After scraping the excess on the rim, he straightened, bringing Juli with him and hugging her backside to his front.

She wiggled in appreciation. "Hurry up. It's starting to drip."

"What's a few drips between friends?" Murmuring the words in her ear, he raised her hand and the gloppy brush smacked the wall.

Cord angled her arm and flexed her wrist, demonstrating how to move the paintbrush up and down, up and down. "See? It's easy." He started rubbing his body against hers in time with the slow strokes. "So simple even a woman can do it."

"A *woman*?" Juli couldn't resist. She whirled around, smacking him in the jaw with the paintbrush.

"Hey!" he protested, his eyes wide with shock, his chin smeared mauve. He snatched the brush from her and swatted her bottom with it. "Don't start somethin' you can't win."

"Oh yeah?" She grabbed his discarded paintbrush. Dipping it in the can before he could stop her, she flung the thick liquid his direction. It splattered his skin, landing in little droplets all over his bare chest.

"You're gonna be sorry you did that!" Cord came at her and their paint fight escalated. He slapped her playfully with the brush and she battled back, smearing the deep pink color all over him. He retaliated by picking up the paint can, dunking in his fingers and flicking them at her.

Speckles of pink blobbed on her chest, more in her hair. Juli gasped and spit paint out of her mouth.

Game over. He was winning. Good thing he'd laid down drop cloths.

"Ew. Tastes awful!" Juli backed away, almost tripping over her own feet.

Cord's arms came up and caught her. "Whoa there."

"Cease fire!" She laughed as he wrapped her tight in his embrace, their bodies slipping against each other.

"You surrender?"

"Mmm...yeah." Easy to do, slicked up against his bare chest as she was.

"Yeah is right," Cord agreed in a husky voice, digging in the pocket of his jeans. "But I'm down to five rubbers, so we better make it count."

They fell to the floor, simultaneously grappling with clothes, pushing, pulling, tugging to get free. To get naked.

"Don't we always?" Juli ripped her shirt off, relishing the feel of his paint-covered chest as she slid against him, loving the way Cord's hands were everywhere – touching, feeling, adoring. Making her feel alive. Making her happy.

Painting magic into her life.

## Chapter Sixteen

Rio couldn't look away.

Painful as it was, he couldn't tear his eyes from the scene before him.

Carrying six plastic bags of supplies, three in each hand, Rio had let himself in the back door when no one answered his knocks or shouts for assistance, surprised they hadn't heard him drive up.

Curious about the laughter he heard once inside, he'd relinquished his burden and gone in search, more curious about exactly what Cord and Juliana might be doing *together*.

He'd considered a multitude of possibilities.

He'd found his worst nightmare.

So here he stood, sporting an erection that could be termed a lethal weapon—it was certainly killing him—watching *his* girl, butt-naked, climbing over and riding a practical stranger.

Cord lay on his back amidst several stained work sheets, his feet toward Rio. Juliana straddled his waist, facing Cord, her hands on his chest, her bouncing excitement electrifying the chemically saturated atmosphere. Paint clung to their bodies. Their slick, sweat-dampened bodies.

With every stroke, Rio watched Cord's cock disappearing inside her cunt, heard the sticky, slurping sounds that filled the air. And he hung back, partially concealed by the doorframe and soaked it in—the forbidden sight. Every time Juliana rose and fell on top of Cord, she cried out, moaning. *Laughing*.

It was impossible not to get aroused seeing Juliana wild with passion, knowing the way her eyes would be heavy, glazed with desire, the way her lips would be plump and full from Cord's kisses, glistening every time she licked them in invitation.

Impossible but wrong. Rio's heart thudded, an eighty-pound weight landing on his chest with every beat. What the hell was wrong with him? He must be sick in the head! For years he hadn't even been able to get it up, much less keep it up, but watching Juliana make love to *another* man had his shaft at DEFCON 1, maximum readiness. How did she do that? Get him so damn horny he stood there, a fucking voyeur, staring at two other people doing what he longed for, what had been denied him since the accident.

A fire was sparking in him, unreasonable, unexplainable, and it took all his control not to move forward, to mount Juliana's sweet, round ass, and fuck her sassy butt as she rode her current lover.

To remind her—thoroughly—just who it was she belonged to. Him!

*Madre de Dios!* How could she?

He'd thought he meant something to her! *He'd* tasted her passion first, not Cord!

Juliana was angling her hips, rubbing her pussy over Cord's pubic hairs. Writhing in the paint. Groaning at the sensations.

Or was that him?

Rio clenched his fists and shifted in the doorway. He had to get a grip. He'd anticipated this, hadn't he? It meant nothing. Juliana was *his*, she'd always be *his*. He sure as hell didn't intend to share her.

He couldn't take any more. He had to get out of there.

Taking a step back, he bumped into the wall. The small sound seemed to echo around him.

Cord glanced in his direction. Their eyes locked.

Nervously, Rio's hand went to his face as if to hide the scars. To conceal his embarrassment. His weakness.

Something flashed in Cord's gaze. His eyes flicked downward, spotted Rio's erection then shot straight back to his face.

*Shit.* He was caught red-handed and hard-cocked spying on them. But he couldn't move. Didn't want to.

What amazed him more was that he was even able to hold back. To watch. To let Juliana fuck another man. But intruding and demanding her love didn't appeal. He wanted to be wanted, to be invited, sought after.

*Was that what he wanted?*

The thought caught him off guard. For her to come *after* him? Right. As if that would happen. If the way he looked didn't preclude that possibility, the way he'd lied to her—first keeping his existence a secret, now keeping her trapped—certainly would.

So he stood there, a scarred, horny bastard, torturing himself, watching as the humanly perfect specimen beneath her smiled knowingly and returned his attention back to Juliana, dismissing Rio as if he didn't exist.

God, that hurt.

Rio wanted to storm out and run away. He wanted to leave. He *needed* to get off. But he stayed, too weak to move. And he watched, watched as Cord wrapped the fingers of one hand in Juliana's hair and tugged her head back in a fierce grip until she was staring at the ceiling.

She whimpered, but the action of her hips never ceased. With every lift and fall of her pelvis, Rio watched Cord's cock disappear between the flushed, hairy mound of Juliana's cunt. Watched it and yearned for it. To touch...to taste.

Cord tightened the hold on her hair. Rio's eyes widened. Why couldn't he look away? *Why couldn't he leave?*

With his other hand, Cord delivered a swift smack to her bottom. "Who are you thinking about?" Cord asked, his voice gruff.

Juliana hesitated, the motion of her pelvis stilled. "You," she whispered, barely loud enough for Rio to hear.

Cord slapped her bottom again, making her cry out. "Tell me the truth. Louder, this time. Who are you thinking about?"

"You and Rio," Juliana yelled, collapsing on top of Cord and closing her thighs around his. "You and Rio," she said again, crying.

Cord released her hair and hugged her with one arm while smacking her thighs with the other. His eyes locked with Rio's once again.

Emotion flared in Rio's gut, molten, ready to explode. He dug his fingernails into the doorframe to keep from rushing forward and claiming her. *His woman.*

"Why are you thinking about Rio?" Cord demanded, no longer spanking her but now lifting his buttocks off the floor, arching his penis higher into her body. "Why are you thinking about Rio while you ride *my* cock?" Cord stared straight at Rio, all emotion shielded from his face. "Why, Juli?"

He popped her ass again when she remained silent.

Rio stopped breathing as he waited for her answer.

"I'm always thinking about Rio."

"Even when you're having sex with me?" Cord wouldn't let him look away.

"Even when I'm having sex with anybody. Oh God!" Juliana screamed, coming hard.

And Rio felt his own cock tighten and release, his pelvic muscles contract as he reached goddamn climax without ever touching his goddamn body.

Felt it and the emotion clogging his throat, clawing at his heart, clamoring for freedom.

Without making a sound, he turned and walked away.

And just when had someone given him an IV of ninety proof? He didn't remember downing a fifth!

Fire blazed along his cock, searing hot and dangerous. Grasping Juli's hips, Cord plunged into her pussy and took her to the hilt hard and fast. But it wasn't enough.

Nothing could clear the confusion in his mind. His heart.

Had he been using his brain, he wouldn't have put Juli's desire for Rio on blatant display. And why, even now, did the memory of Rio watching them make his libido skyrocket?

That wasn't normal.

He told himself he'd made Juli admit her desire for Rio out of pity. It was clear Rio was self-conscious about his scars. Hurting inside, the same as Cord was. Only Rio's scars were more visible.

But the crazy truth? He'd been turned-on. Actually hoping Rio would join them. Actually *wanting* to share her.

The thought made cum fill his shaft, made him pulse with the threat of an orgasm. With a grunt, Cord rolled over and pounded into her body, only pulling out when he was afraid he might hurt her. On arms and knees above her, Cord fisted his erection and jacked off so damn fast, the condom went sailing over her body and his semen shot out, spraying the floor. And Juli.

"Damn, woman," he groaned, enjoying every last drop of his orgasm as he squeezed his cock again and watched several more trickles of cum ooze free. "Just look at the mess you made."

Juli swiped sticky, paint-covered strands of hair from her face with a lighthearted sigh. "That's just what a lady wants to hear after lovemaking." Leaning forward, she planted a kiss to the one clean spot on his shoulder. "That was fantastic."

*Lovemaking.* He loved it when she called it that.

With a grin, he hefted himself up. "Come on," he urged. "I think I heard a car door."

Her eyes widened. Blood drained from her face. "Rio's home?"

She was excited. Or nervous?

A strange feeling overwhelmed Cord. What happened now that Rio was back? Did she choose? Did he lose her?

Or something...kinkier?

Shit. He'd lost more than his soul in that war. He'd lost his damn mind. Any man with half a brain would be jealous. Fighting for his woman. And here Cord was, almost hoping to share her.

Helping Juli to her feet, Cord swatted her on the ass. "Go. I'll boil you some water to wash up with."

Right after he had a talk with Rio.

Moving like a guilty teenager hiding from her parents, Juli separated her discarded clothes from the drop sheets, hugging the paint-splattered fabric against her chest. "Hurry and get dressed, okay? I don't want him to see...to know what..." Her sentence trailed off and she looked at him with huge eyes. "Is that why you asked...about him?"

"No." Cord felt his cock twitch at the memory of Rio observing them. "Not even close."

"Why then?"

"I'll tell you later." He swatted her bottom again. "Now go, before he walks in."

Again.



Juli fled the room, leaving him a huge mess—in more ways than one. Boldly, Cord strutted into the kitchen. He didn't care that he was naked and covered in paint any more than he cared that Rio had watched them. He only cared about one thing—losing Juli. And he knew that his attitude and actions the next few minutes would likely count for the world.

Whatever happened, Juli was his priority. Well, her and his property, but Cord was starting to think she would come first if there was a contest and he was going to make damn sure he delivered that point across.

Groceries were strewn across the long counter, but the room was empty. Grabbing an old dishrag, Cord peered out the screen door and spotted Rio pitching rocks against the run-down cookhouse.

From the hunched set of his shoulders and the ferocity with which he threw, Cord knew he was infuriated.

Cord wiped at his face, his chest, but only succeeded in smearing the paint. He cleared his throat and Rio threw the last stone and turned around slowly. Dark, accusing eyes settled on Cord's naked body from the other side of the screen.

Methodically, Rio approached, stopping when he reached the back porch. He made no move to open the door and Cord made no move to cover himself.

"Well?" Rio tossed down the challenge.

Cord refused to back down. "Did seeing that bother you?"

"Does it bother you that I caught you?" There was something cold, almost feral about Rio's glare. As if he didn't like coming home from the hunt to find his female in another's territory. Or clutches.

"That you caught us? Or that you watched?" Cord raised a brow, trying to play it cool. "Got hard, did you?" he said, just to be an ass. He was pissed at himself for being the stupid male willing to share. What was wrong with him? Why even now did he wonder what it would be like, to share Juli's bliss with another man?

Rio only grunted.

Abandoning his stiff posture, Cord haphazardly slung the towel at his waist and held it in place. He pushed the screen door and it opened on squeaking hinges.

Rio stepped back wearily into the yard.

"Well?" Cord demanded. "Did it bother you or not?"

Rio grunted again and looked toward the barn. "Not as much as I thought it would. Or as much as it should."

His answer stunned Cord. For a moment, Cord stared into blank space, resting against the back of the house as he contemplated the strange situation he found himself in. He watched Rio bend down and retrieve a handful of rocks and begin throwing them again.

Once. Twice. Then the whole handful clanged against the metal roof, measuring Rio's frustration.

*What now?*

Suddenly, Rio turned and faced him. A muscle ticced beneath the shiny skin stretched tight across the left side of his face.

"What?" Cord refused to look away. Poor bastard. "You contemplatin' taking another swing at me? Is that it?"

"Is Juliana in love with you?"

"I don't know," Cord answered truthfully. "Too soon for that, don't you think? But I'm pretty damn sure I'm falling in love with her."

"So why'd you do that?" The muscle ticced faster, like a metronome beating out a hurried tempo. "Why'd you make her admit she was thinking about me?"

*How'd you do that?* Cord heard the unspoken question.

"I don't know." Cord shrugged. "Call it instinct."

Rio was quiet a moment then the right side of his mouth quirked in a desultory imitation of a grin. "I've just become a huge supporter of instinct."

Cord's stiff posture relaxed finally. "Guess that makes two of us then."

## Chapter Seventeen

Attire – stained overalls.

Hair – unmitigated Disaster – with a capital D.

Makeup – where was Estée Lauder when a girl needed her?

Boobs – smooshed beneath the flannel shirt, trapped beneath the bib.

*And* stupid freckles dotted her nose and forehead. Where had those come from?

Two hours ago, Juli wouldn't have cared. She might have even felt sexy in the frumpish clothing with her hair loose and frizzy, confident Cord would love how she looked no matter what she wore. But now she was close to tears.

Because Rio was back.

*Rio.*

She hadn't seen him yet. He'd remained outside, away from her, and Juli hadn't gathered the nerve to go running into his arms.

She stared out the window, which wasn't any help—she could see her horrible reflection gazing back at her. If only she could stop feeling so anxious, stop hurting inside each time she thought of him, but with every hour that passed knowing Rio was alive and attracted to her, the heartache grew worse. How would she ever get beyond her need for him?

Knuckles rapped on the bedroom door.

"What is it?" she called, unsure who it was and too chicken to move from her perch by the window.

Cord opened the door and poked his head in. "Dinner's about ready."

She rested her hand on the sill to balance herself and faced him. "Rio?"

Cord let himself in and walked over to the window. She stood and he immediately wrapped his arms around her, embracing her, *comforting* her as he planted a reassuring kiss on her cheek. "He's downstairs. Where I thought *you'd* be over an hour ago. What's up?"

"I look horrible," she wailed, stifling a snuffle. What had happened to her independent take-charge self? God. She was acting hormonal but couldn't even claim that as an excuse—she'd finished her period last week. "It didn't matter before. I haven't even thought about feeling self-conscious with you, but now..."

She buried her face against his chest, breathing in his woodsy scent, licking the skin lightly peppered with fine hairs peeking out from his unbuttoned shirt. Wishing they could go back in time and paint some more. Play some more. "I don't want to go downstairs. I'm not even all that hungry. Any chance I can just eat up here?" Juli

squeezed his torso, letting her hands linger suggestively at his waistband. "You could join me..."

Unaccountably, she didn't want to face Rio. Would he be able to tell? Would he know what she'd been doing the past few days with Cord? What she still wanted to do?

But she hadn't betrayed him, she reminded herself, not really. And he'd most definitely betrayed her trust, so even if she did feel guilty—which she didn't—she was justified. Right?

Guilt persisted, stabbing at her chest, and Juli sought Cord's mouth with her own, putting her heart and soul into the kiss. Trying to forget Rio. Needing to forget Cord.

Needing to get back to her own life. How could she have forgotten that—if even for a minute? And she'd thought Cord needed counseling? She moaned and kissed him harder.

"Nonsense, darlin'," Cord mumbled beneath her lips, slowly loosening his hold, softening her attack. He leaned back and tilted her chin. "You're the most gorgeous creature I've ever set eyes on and I want you to waltz down those stairs like you know it and—"

Juli couldn't contain her sob. Why did she even care what Rio might think? The damn brute! "I'm sorry. I'm just...confused."

"Juli, Juli, Juli," Cord whispered, rocking her in his arms. "Don't let this whole thing get you down. Please."

She cried louder.

"Hey." Cord shook her gently. "I'm on your side. Rio is too, even if you're not particularly thrilled with his methods."

"I'm sorry." And she was. "I can't seem to help it."

Cord tensed then relaxed, blowing out a breath. "I have an idea. Come on. I have something to show you."

She allowed him to guide her down the hall where he reached past her to push a door open, revealing a surprisingly feminine bedroom.

"This was Nana's haven when Grandpop's snoring got too loud." Cord walked around the old-fashioned canopy bed to a wardrobe in the corner. "I was surprised to find it still intact, but evidently he didn't have to heart to throw anything out. I haven't had a chance—or the guts—to go through it yet."

"Cord..." She slowly followed, drawn to the personal history he was sharing.

"No worries." He tugged on the metal handle and the wardrobe's mirrored door swung open. "I'm feeling good about this. You better as well. I don't let just anyone go pawing through her things, you know. I think you're pretty close to Nana's size, both of you smaller than a minute. I'm sure you'll find something that'll work and there's even some old makeup packets and jewelry on her vanity."

"Really," Juli protested, glancing at the dresser. "I don't need—wait a minute." She caught sight of something that totally distracted her. "Hairpins? You had *hairpins* and didn't tell me?"

"Guilty as charged. You know I love your hair down—all free and loose. Wild, just like you."

He looked so cute standing there, complimenting her untamable hair that she didn't have the heart to tear into him, but she couldn't stand silent either. "Cord."

"What?"

Juli shrugged, confused, comforted, feeling conflicted. "I'm going crazy about how I look and you waltz in with a solution. And say all the right things. But really, I can't use your grandmother's—"

Cord halted her words by curving one hand around her nape and tilting her head. "Yes, you can. Just do me a favor—don't take too long and don't come out looking like Nana. Look like *you*." He kissed her forehead and his lips lingered a moment. "I'd like to see the real you—the glamorous, put-together reporter you claim to be. The woman who would never get caught with a paintbrush in her hand. Naked."

He growled the last word and she smiled. "Or have sex on a drop cloth?"

Cord groaned and pulled back to stare into her eyes. His gaze glinted with something she didn't recognize. "And most importantly, I want you to be comfortable and happy. I'm hoping for a special evening. So get dressed, woman. Chop. Chop."

With a wink, he left her standing there, alone and baffled. He'd offered her his precious grandmother's belongings just because she was self-conscious about facing Rio?

What a man—Cord was so sensitive, so loving. Everything she should want.

Except that no matter how hard he tried, he wasn't everything she needed and somehow he seemed to accept that. She hadn't lied to him, hadn't misled him. But nonetheless, she hated herself for hurting him. If only there was a way...

To what? Have both men?

How selfish was that? How implausible, not to mention impossible.

And what had Cord meant when he said *special evening*?

Shaking off her unease, Juli dug inside the wardrobe, resigned to wearing his grandmother's clothes. She just couldn't bring herself to face Rio in overalls.

It was bad enough facing him after what she'd been *doing* with Cord. God. Rio would flip out if he knew.

\* \* \* \* \*

Twelve minutes later, Juli felt like a new woman. Still confused over her conflicting feelings for both men, she took solace knowing she'd left her hillbilly look behind. Neither did she resemble the proverbial little old lady who only drove on Sundays

either, which had been her initial concern when she'd seen the array of tiny makeup samples, miniature lipsticks and dated attire.

Cord's grandmother was clearly more petite, especially in the chest. The white sweater she'd chosen fit snugly, accenting her braless state and the black and white swirl-patterned scarf – the most modern-looking item she'd found – now fashioned into a skirt, rode high on her thighs and wrapped across her backside.

Thank God for lunges, Juli thought, glancing at her reflection in the hazy circular mirror above the vanity before returning to scrounge in the bottom of the wardrobe but without luck. No other shoes. Ah well.

Choosing to leave her feet bare rather than put on the pink slippers, Juli brushed her hair and pinned it up, slicking the sides back with a bit of old-fashioned spit. She didn't have the heart to wear the makeup or perfume, but just taming her frizzy waves and wearing a "skirt" did loads for her confidence.

"It's now or never, girl. Get out there and wow 'em," she told her reflection then stuck out her tongue. "You've stalled long enough."

Ignoring the nerves fluttering in her stomach, Juli headed down the stairs. The closer she inched to the dining room, the more distinct the low rumble of the men's voices became.

Rather than announce her presence right away, she leaned against the arched doorway to compose herself. Just beyond the dining room was the kitchen. She couldn't believe how antsy she felt just knowing that Rio was a scant room away.

"...tomorrow, but I can't drive you." Rio's lightly accented voice floated by and caressed her eardrums. Shivers raced through her and Juli reached up and brushed her hand over her ear, testing for strands of hair that had escaped but found none. It was amazing – Rio really was only a few feet away. She dug her bare toes into the wooden floor, absorbing the knowledge of his presence, his life. Her stomach dipped when he spoke again. "Someone has to stay with Juliana, so just borrow the SUV and bring it back in one piece, that's all I ask."

"Maybe Juli could come with us," Cord suggested, amidst the occasional clang of dishware. "I think she'd love a trip into town. Not much there, but I'm sure she could use some personal things."

Yes! God, *yes*! Resisting the urge to squeal, Juli began making a mental note of all the things she needed.

Toothbrush.

Hair ties.

Shampoo and conditioner.

Razor and shaving cre –

"No." The fridge opened and shut, slamming her hopes. "No way. We can't take the chance."

Bastard!

"Juli won't be pleased to hear that I'm going off without her," Cord commented. "How much longer before they catch these guys?"

"Tom said they ought to be closing in any day now. He'll keep me informed when the bust goes down and what happens, who they arrest, but even then I don't think she—"

"Rio, you can't keep Juli from living her life," Cord told him over the sounds of clinking flatware—he was really going all out, wasn't he? Other than a spoon for their sauce, they'd practically eaten with their fingers.

"She wants to go home," Cord added emphatically, but for some reason Juli was starting to question how true that statement was.

"Did she try to escape?"

A pause in the noise then Cord drawled, "Well now, she's still here, isn't she?"

"You didn't answer my question." Rio swore under his breath, exhaling a ragged sigh of frustration. "Understand this, Cord—I'm concerned for her. I'm not certain Juliana's safety can be guaranteed, and if it were up to me, she'd never go back. It flat out isn't safe. The Benitos' reach is farther than you or I can comprehend. Right now the smartest thing would be for Juliana to consider starting over again somewhere far away from DC and the political scene."

It was starting to grate like nails on a chalkboard—the way they were discussing her. Discussing her *life* as if she had no say. And come to think on it, they'd become mighty chummy all of a sudden, hadn't they?

She heard Cord stomp from the kitchen and thump something down on the table. "And I guess you believe you'll be taking her from here to start that life?"

"She can't go alone." Rio had followed. "She needs protection. I aim to give it to her."

That did it. Arms crossed, Juli whipped around the arch then came to a standstill. She couldn't believe it. The dining room table had been set with candles. Flickering candles. In the dark.

"Candles?" Just when she was ready to let her temper fly they go and do something so...so, so damn romantic. Crap.

"Told you, darlin'." Cord winked at her. "This is a special occasion."

"Wow, this sure beats microwave dinners." But she couldn't let the unexpectedly beautiful scene distract her, so Juli stood tall in her bare feet and borrowed clothes and glared at them both. Clearing her throat, she addressed Rio. "After the way I'm being treated and pampered, maybe I want *Cord* to protect me. Maybe I want to stay *here* forever."

Had she just said that? Both men stared at her, brows raised in obvious surprise then they rounded the dining table, Rio in the lead. Shadows from the flames whipped over his face, danced in his midnight eyes. Damn. Even with a quarter of his face scarred, he still made her go weak in the knees.

He was so tall, his presence so big and overshadowing all of the hurt, the irritation. Turning her to mush.

"Juliana, *ángelita*," his voice warmed her, heating her insides. "I didn't know you were listening."

Rio walked straight to her and tugged one of her hands free.

She refused to acknowledge how good his touch felt and quickly snatched it back. Then she protested because she *had* to. "I can't believe you're actually thinking of holding me hostage *forever*."

"Now, *ángelita*, I didn't say that—"

"Then just what are you saying? How dare you think you can run my life? Make my decisions?"

"We'll discuss it later." He bent down and deposited a gentle, lingering kiss to her cheek. She winced at the contact and shifted away.

"Alone," he stressed. "If the prospect of that doesn't overly disgust you."

"I don't want to be alone with you," she lied. Hating how he made her tremble inside. Damn his hide! Why did she have to react so passionately to him?

Cord came forward, interrupting their spat-in-the-making, and guided her toward a chair at the table. "I'm not sure Juli'll have time later," he said with real regret in his voice. "We have plans. Going stargazing."

*They were?* Cord pinched her bottom and she jumped. "We are! Cord's ever-so wonderful at night." Had she just said *that*? What had happened to the connection between her brain and her mouth?

Rio appeared to be strangling. Or wanting to strangle someone. Juli couldn't resist prodding him further. She ran her hand down Cord's brawny upper arm, letting her fingers press seductively into the bunched muscles. "He's *very* knowledgeable about the sky, you know. Knows more than most astronomers."

Rio's eyes narrowed. "Then perhaps I'll join you."

Cord squashed a laugh, tweaked her side and pulled out her chair. There were three formal place settings, each set with fancy china and each showcasing a heaping plate of steaming pasta. She was still taking it all in when Cord murmured in her ear. "You look beautiful tonight, Juli darlin'. You surely glow brighter than the candles."

He was painting it on a bit thick, but Juli didn't care, especially when Rio growled low in his throat.

"I brought you some things." He elbowed Cord out of the way and pushed her seat in behind her. "Some clothing. Some deodorant, perfume, that sort of thing. *Shoes*," he stressed and Juli had to fight a sudden urge to laugh at the way they were battling over her and vying for her attention.

Finally starting to relax, she quipped, "Perfume? Are you saying I stink?"

"Stink? God, no!"



Cord barked with laughter. "I'll go get the bread from the oven and leave you two to settle this." He winked. "Play fair."

Fair? *Fair!* What about being snatched off the pavement while drunk and held hostage in a mice-ridden dump while the story she was risking her life for went to waste warranted being fair?

Taking the seat next to her, Rio's eyes followed Cord from the room. Apparently satisfied his nemesis was out of earshot, he turned back to her.

Juli's smile was glass. She picked up her napkin and shook it out, letting it fall precisely squared on her lap. "Perhaps you should keep the deodorant. You need it more."

"Juliana." Not even acknowledging the insult, Rio smoothed his voice, gazing at her almost seductively. "I just thought you'd appreciate having your own things."

Her newfound composure vanished.

"My things?" What, had he broken into her house? Rummaged her panty drawer? Her medicine cabinet? Juli flushed, her heart accelerating at the thought of Rio invading her private space, choosing from her things, fingering her lingerie. "How did you get into my house?"

For that matter, had he selected satin thongs or cotton panties? And how soon could she model them for his viewing pleasure? Pressure nudged her clit and Juli wondered if perhaps she'd be leaving a damp spot on the chair's fabric seat.

Then she thought about pushing away from the table, climbing over Rio and straddling his lap. Oh God. She hoped he brought the thongs.

"Well, not exactly your things." He fished her keychain from his pocket and handed it to her, looking almost...guilty? "I picked this up in the parking lot when I kidnapped you. But..."

"What?" Juli seized the keys, folding them in her palm. She squeezed the cold metal tight. "You should have returned them to me!"

"Maybe so, but ah...Juliana...*ángelita*..."

She could hear it in his voice, in the way he said her pet name. *Ángelita*. So concerned, so lovingly, as if calling her an angel would soften the blow to come. Her pussy dried up faster than the Sahara after sunrise. "Rio, what's wrong? What happened?"

He cleared his throat but held her gaze. "I went to your house but someone had already been there—shattered the front window, ransacked every room searching high and low. Juliana, I'm sorry, but it was a wreck, so I left, called my friend on the force. He sent over a unit to check it out, fingerprint."

The Benitos had tossed her place. Wonderful. Just grand. Turning her hand over, she pressed the keys to the tablecloth and left them there.

A *whoosh* of air burst from her lungs. "My laptop, did you see it?"

"No, but I doubt they would've left it."

Well, she had no way of knowing for certain if they'd found the interview on her hard drive, but at least she had one consolation—she still had the backup copy. As long as she had that, she had her proof. She was beginning to believe going public with her story was the only way out of this mess—the cops sure were taking their time. Not that Rio was going to permit her to do anything but play hide-and-stink on this plantation, since he'd proclaimed himself president of her existence.

"Is someone going to board up my window, so the rest of DC doesn't have a field day picking off the remainder of my life?"

"The property manager who works out of my office took care of hiring someone to change the locks, board up the doors and windows."

How pleasant. Her neighbors were going to petition her out of her house by the time she freed herself of Rio.

"Anyway," he continued, "I did bring you a few things I thought you could use." Shifting his weight in the chair, the wood moaning its protest under his large frame, he pulled a thin rectangular jewelry box from his back pocket. "And this."

There went her heart again, getting all carried away. She stared at the velvet box, uncertain. "What is it?"

"Just open it."

She was almost afraid to. Scared she'd like whatever it was, terrified because no matter what was in the box, she *had* to be pissed about it.

No man had the right to kidnap a woman and hold her without conditioning shampoo for days on end then expect something shiny to just smooth things over. It didn't work like that, not even if said man was sexy. Or the star of her teenage fantasies. Nope.

"Open it," he urged again.

Slowly, Juli flipped the top back, revealing a watch. Not just any watch, but a gold watch with mother-of-pearl dial and diamond hour markers. Stunningly beautiful. And outrageously expensive. It had to be.

For a moment, Juli forgot to breathe. Forgot about her wished-for thong and forgot about being kidnapped.

"To replace your broken one."

"Rio..." Touched, she ran her fingertips over the watch's gold band.

"Juliana, *ángelita*," Rio drawled in a velvet voice that matched the box. "Let me help you, keep you safe. Tell me what they were looking for in your home. Tell me, please."

Juli snapped the lid shut. "I don't want it," she gulped, shoving the box toward him.

He glanced at it but didn't touch. "I bought that for you."

"Understand this, Rio. You can't buy me—me or my trust. Neither is for sale."

Juli searched Rio's dark eyes, dying inside. Didn't this man have any clue what he did to her? How she wanted him? And yet, he seemed to be on a mission to drive her away, to force her to feel just the opposite. *Used*.

A welcome interruption, Cord sauntered into the room, carrying a steaming basket of bread fresh from the oven. "Everythin' okay? It turned mighty quiet—all that whisperin' and such."

Arranging the bread in the middle of the table, he took his seat across from her, his presence upping the tension as he silently questioned both of them with those haunted, hungry eyes when they failed to respond.

The three sat in awkward silence, tortured for very different reasons as they inhaled the spicy Italian flavors filling the air. She glanced at the velvet box, the keys then both the men.

It was craziness. All of it.

She couldn't do this. Not now. Maybe never. Juli whipped her napkin from her lap and threw it next to her plate. Bracing her palms on the table, she rose. "I'm done here. I'll be in my room."

"No." Rio covered her hand with his. "No, Juliana. Please stay."

She glanced at Rio, at Cord. They both looked as needy and confused as she felt. Hesitantly, she sat down and picked up her fork. She swept the utensil through the mound of pasta, swirling it around as she forced a smile and thanked her host. "Cord, this smells delicious. It was nice of you—"

"It's not my doin'," he said, gesturing to Rio with his glass. "Thank him. All I did was clean the plates and heat it up."

"I brought it from Rosaria's—your favorite restaurant." Rio said, looking rather satisfied with himself. "They were serving lunch when I headed out, but I begged and paid dearly for their chef to make you some pasta off their dinner menu."

"Oh." Juli didn't know how to react. What to say. Did she thank him...or scream at him? "Thoughtful, that was thoughtful of you," she stammered, "but how do you know what my favorite restaurant is?"

Just how long had he been watching her? And *why*?

His expression became stoic. "You mentioned it during a broadcast once."

All this time he could have come forward, claimed her. But he'd remained in the shadows, hiding from her. Letting her hurt.

Were all the men in her life completely unstable? What the hell was wrong with her?

"Well, Rio? Just how long have you been stalking me?" she couldn't help but ask, a small part of her secretly pleased when he winced. Served him right, hiding from her all these years. "How long?"

But Rio never had a chance to answer her.

"Juli, I think you should know – Rio saw us making love earlier," Cord blurted out, catching them both completely off guard. "Saw us and *watched*."

She felt as if she'd been slapped. Rio jerked back as if he had been.

"What?" Her fork dropped from numb fingers. It clattered against the edge of her plate then crashed to the floor. No one made a move to retrieve it. "And you didn't tell me? You just *let* him?" Fuming, she lifted her head until she snagged Rio's eyes.

He didn't even seem embarrassed. But maybe it was a trick of the flickering candlelight. He should be furious, right? Or at least mortified. Jealous... Dammit, he should feel *something*. "And you...you liar! Coward."

"He enjoyed spying on us, if I'm not mistakin'," Cord added, reaching into the breadbasket. "It got him hard."

"Hard?" she squeaked, her attention swinging back to Cord. "As in *aroused*?"

Beside her, Rio rammed his fist into the table. "*Por Dios, Cord! Esperate!* For God's sake, man. Stop!"

"Instinct, man." Cord shot Rio a smile.

"That's enough!" Rio growled.

"Saw his erection lining his pants from twelve feet away. Definitely hard. No doubt about it. What do you make of that, Juli?"

"Rio?" Her head twitched and she was staring at Rio, but he wouldn't look at her, was suddenly fascinated with buttering some Italian bread. The knife slipped in his hand and he cursed. She talked right over his pain. "Hard as in you get off watching others? Or hard as in eager to join in?"

Oh God, what was she saying?

A vision of Rio's thick cock standing tall, of him standing in the shadows, gaze narrowed as he watched them flooded her mind. The elegant table and tasty pasta evaporated and her body turned into a giant pulsing orgasm waiting to happen.

All she could think and feel was Cord's cock plunging into her, Rio's eyes on her.

Cord under her, Rio over her. Rio beneath her, Cord on top.

Fucking her, driving her wild.

Fulfilling her as neither of them could do alone.

White-hot desire swept through her, shooting through her body like a billion firecrackers exploding at once. Heat flared in her loins, making her pussy burn. Her anus pucker.

Juli gasped for air, hardly able to breathe. She shook away the images, trying to get a grasp on herself. Squeezing her legs together, she prompted, needing to hear his response, "You were *hard*, Rio?"

Cord piped in again. "I think he did want to join us."

*And oh, how I want to invite him.*

"What?" She was as shocked at herself as she was at Rio and Cord. "Did you, Rio?" she heard the sarcasm in her tone but couldn't seem to turn it off. "Want to join in our fun?"

Dammit, why was she getting so wet? Why was she letting herself be carried away with an absurd fantasy about having them both? *At the same time!*

"This is ridiculous," Rio ground out. His hand went to his scar, as if to hide his face. "I can't believe you told her, *pinche joven*."

"You haven't answered me," Juli pressed.

"And I'm damn well not going to." Rio stood abruptly, crashing his chair into the back wall. He swore fluently in Spanish and stormed from the room, leaving her and Cord in the resulting silence. Louder now after what had just occurred.

Though her crotch ached as if she hadn't had a man in forever and her throat felt so swollen she could hardly speak, she had to ask... "That's why you demanded to know who I was thinking about, isn't it? Because Rio was there?"

"Yes."

"Why, Cord?" she asked. "And why didn't you tell me earlier when we were alone?"

"I...I don't know."

"You don't know?"

Her heart was going a million miles an hour, threatening to beat right out of her chest.

Did Cord actually *want* Rio to join them?

Cord shoved his plate aside and reached across the table, covering her hands with his. His thumbs caressed both of her palms. "I only know that I love you, Juli. And I think you love me too. Me *and* Rio."

It was true. *Too* true.

She closed her eyes, mortified at being caught screwing one man while thinking about another. Embarrassed by the whole situation because she *wasn't* embarrassed at being caught. She was turned-on. Horribly so. "It doesn't matter. Rio only loves himself."

"Not even close. He's so damn self-conscious about those scars, he doesn't feel like he has the right..." Cord squeezed her hands. "Rio does love you."

Why was Cord doing this? Being so...so *okay* about Rio? Men should come with owner manuals. This couldn't be real.

"You don't have to care. You shouldn't be so nice. You should be pissed at me." She pulled her hands free, staring at him. She was too confused. She needed answers. Real ones. "You didn't have to tell me all this. You could have kept it a secret. Lied."

"I can do lots of things, but what I feel for you is pure. It's real and honest. I don't want to damage that, angel."

Pure? How pure and angelic was loving and desiring two men at once?

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesus. What the hell had happened in there?

He ought to strangle Cord. Beat the life from him. He *thought* they'd had an understanding. Before dinner, Cord had acted as if he were cool about what had happened.

Instinct, his ass.

His left side ached more than usual. Happened when he grew stressed. Damn Cord. Damn scars.

Rio stood on the front porch, glaring out at the stars as if they were to blame for his current predicament. His every muscle was tight with tension. Searing-hot emotions simmered in him, ready to boil over at any moment. Jealousy, anger, confusion. Embarrassment.

*Guilt.*

Cord had thrown a touchdown with that last pass—he'd wanted to join them. Rio had enjoyed seeing the love of his life being fucked by another man.

But he sure as hell didn't like it.

The screen door creaked open then banged shut.

The unique scent that was pure Juliana rose from behind him. "Rio? Please be honest with me," she said, and he heard how her voice shook. "Is it true? Did you get aroused watching us?"

Rio grabbed the railing, squeezing the aged wood so hard he was surprised it didn't splinter under the pressure. "I'm not sure my pride can take this."

"Maybe this isn't about pride." Her voice was soft, almost soothing.

How the hell could she be so damn nonchalant about the situation?

Maybe Juliana wasn't the woman he thought she was.

She glided over to him, her body brushing his. Electricity zapped through him, bolting straight to his groin. His cock twitched, ready to come to life. Randy bastard. It wanted to cooperate *now*?

"I wish..." Not finishing her request, she looked up at him, her eyes wide. She bit her lower lip. "Rio."

"What?" he ground out. "What do you wish?"

He didn't mean to sound so bitter, but dammit, how the hell did he get past what he'd seen, what he'd all but been invited to do over dinner?

*Share Juliana?* Christ. How could he?

Worse, how could he not? Not when she was all he ever wanted...

There was magic between them, this magnet that pulled them toward each other. He'd always desired her, always wanted to make her his. Only Juliana did it for him. He wasn't sure he could keep his hands off her, another man or not.

"Nothing. Never mind." Her gaze fell. Her hand moved to his and she tangled her fingers around his, squeezing. "Just know this—the way I feel about you hasn't changed. You'll always be my dream lover, the man in all my fantasies. You always have been."

"And yet you were screwing Cord." And enjoying it mightily.

Rio snatched his hand free, turned and framed her face and stared into her glittering eyes, their color indecipherable at night. But not the emotion. Pride shone at him. He saw no shame, no regret. "Where you're concerned, Juliana Reed, it's no *comprendo, comprende?*"

She wasn't begging for forgiveness, she was asking him to understand her needs.

Well, dammit, he had his own.

Slowly, he stroked his thumb over her cheek. Maybe now was the time to ask? While she was sultry and supple, relaxed beneath his touch. But he really hated to break the spell. "*Ángelita*, I need a favor from you."

"A favor?" Interest flashed in her gaze.

"I need you to help me."

"What kind of favor, I'm wondering," she said archly when he didn't continue, hearing the change in his tone. Smart woman.

She tilted her head, dislodging his hands. "That takes some nerve, asking a favor of a woman you've kidnapped."

"I need you to call the police, to tell them you're staying here with me willingly."

She scoffed and moved away, walking toward the door. "To think, I'd expected this 'favor' to be of a more intimate nature. That's what I get for hoping, isn't it?" Defiance stiffened her posture. "So tell me, why would I call the police—and lie?"

"For your own good." He caught her arm, pulling her back to him. "Dammit, Juliana, you know I'm right. You were nosing your way into some bad business."

Her eyes shot daggers at the spot where he held her arm then she angled her neck and glared at him. "How long do you intend to keep me hostage?"

"I don't know." He pulled her flush against his body. "Until it's safe for you to go back to the city."

Her chest heaved against his. "That's not what I heard you say earlier."

"I was being whimsical. Deluding myself." He backed her against the railing, pressing his pelvis to hers. "I thought maybe, just maybe, you'd open up your damn eyes. See what was right in front of you. Be insane enough to grab on to it and hold on for dear life." If she wouldn't listen to the truth, she could damn well feel it. He ground himself against her, forcing her to feel *all* of his body.

"You mean you?" With a hiss of anger, she looked away. "My life is in DC."

"Not from what I'm seeing."

"Meaning?"

"You didn't exactly seem happy, award and all, the night I kidnapped you. You were leaving a party *alone*. Drunk."

"That has nothing to do with anything."

"Juliana." Frustration belted through him. "Dammit, woman!" He grabbed her by the back of the head. Pulling out the pins that secured her hair, he knotted his fingers in it and jerked her face to his. Their lips collided and fireworks exploded in the air around them.

"Please." His voice was rough as sandpaper, barely a whisper.

Her eyes said yes, her silence said no.

He could stand neither answer. He was torn inside, as torn as Juliana was between him and Cord. There was no describing the way he ached, the way he wanted her.

He kissed her hard, desperately, plunging his tongue into her mouth. He wanted to consume her, to make her submit to his will, to make her his.

Their tongues twisted and tangled, their breathing rough as they fought to get closer to each other. Fought each other.

Lifting her, he filled his palms with her perfectly round ass cheeks and squeezed roughly. He hauled her in his arms and perched her on the railing. Her feet climbed his legs, wrapping around his waist and he held tight, claiming her mouth, claiming her.

Juliana pulled free, gasping for air. "Rio..."

"Say yes," he demanded. Shoving the soft fabric higher on her thighs, he rotated his hips, pressing his jean-covered erection to her bared cunt. "Give me two weeks, Juliana."

Where the hell were her panties?

Oh right. They'd been torn off days ago.

*No wonder she's sleeping with another man, idiota. You left her here without underwear.*

She shook her head, halfheartedly trying to shove him away. "Rio, I—"

Rough and dominant clearly wasn't working. The more he pushed, the harder she pushed back. The angrier she became.

That left him with one option.

Begging.

"Please, Juliana. Give this to me." He lowered his voice, lowered his head. Nuzzling her neck, he took a different approach, planting little kisses along her collarbone. "Don't make me force you to stay. Stay because you want to. Because you want me. Just two weeks, *ángelita*. The Benitos should be behind bars by then. Please."



He could feel her melting, her body warming to his. She tried to squirm away then relented and squirmed against him instead, rubbing her breasts against his chest, her damp, bared pussy against his lower abdomen.

It took all Rio's strength not to drive three fingers into her moist depths and finger-fuck a yes from her.

"Please, Juliana, talk to my friend on the force. Tell Tom you're staying with me because you *want* to."

She swore under her breath, her face contorting with her internal struggle.

"Please, baby, please." Needing to keep his hands busy lest they commit more naughtier acts, he brushed his fingers lightly over her breasts, feeling the pert peaks of her nipples.

She swallowed, looking at him with a small smile. "Okay. I'll talk to the cops, call them off."

"Oh God. I need you, Juliana. Feel this?" He thrust his cock against her hot pussy once again. Damn, she felt so good. So hot and ready. "Only you can make me hard like this. *Only you.*"

But *she* sure got horny for another man without any trouble, his pride interjected.

"Shit," he swore under his breath. His passion drained away at once, his dick going limp. "Shit!"

"What's wrong?" Moaning, she arched against him.

"I don't know." A ragged breath escaped as he blew away his aggravation. Now was not the time. Pulling free, he took her roving hands in his, trying not to let on to how he felt.

She'd agreed to make the call, he might as well take advantage of that before she changed her mind. "Come on. We have to drive to the highway to get cell reception."

\* \* \* \* \*

He supposed they were one-for-one now.

Crazy as it was, Cord was disappointed that Rio hadn't fucked Juli. Watching the two of them kiss and listening to their exchange through the screen had set his body on fire.

Erection pulsing where he'd left it in his jeans, hoping for a more adventurous outcome, Cord stood at the screen door and watched Rio lead Juli to his SUV.

Two weeks. She'd agreed to stay for two weeks.

What would happen? Would things erupt between them? Would he lose Juli?

*Or will Rio join us?*

Shaking his head, Cord abandoned his porch-side vigil. Where was a bottle of strong liquor when a man needed it? He'd never wanted to get rip-roaring drunk more in his life.

He was pretty damn sure this situation wouldn't end well for him. It seemed he was bound to lose Juli. To lose his heart.

On second thought, he flicked on the porch light and reached for the door. He'd be damned if he quit before the game was over.

## Chapter Eighteen

She couldn't believe she'd agreed to this. Worse, she couldn't believe how *eager* she was to do exactly what Rio wanted. Eager to be alone with him. Eager to please him.

Sliding into the passenger seat, Juli didn't bother with the seat belt. There was no point—it was a dirt road with zero traffic and she doubted Rio would get above ten miles an hour. Crossing her legs, she watched him start the engine with a twist of the keys.

"Put on the radio if you like." He looked at her, a slow, devouring stare that made her grab the belt and snap it in place anyway, just to feel secure. "The satellite should still get a signal here.

"No thanks. I've gotten used to the quiet these past few days."

"Don't get too used to it. Juliana, this thing between you and him. It's not serious," Rio had the absolute gall to state, shifting the SUV into drive. Little rocks pinged off the wheel wells as the vehicle lurched into motion and headed down the darkening lane. That was how she suddenly felt—as though the towering trees were closing in on her. Oppressed.

"It's not? Says who?" Errantly, she glanced back at the plantation house. Cord stood on the porch under the glow of the front light, watching them drive off and her stomach did a little flip-flop when he lifted his hand in a goodbye, so-long wave. What if this was it? What if Rio were taking her home—away from Cord—for good? Juli was surprised how much that thought hurt. "What would you know about serious?" she demanded.

What would it feel like to truly leave Willow Creek, to know she was never coming back to Cord? To return to her old life, the hustle and bustle, the pressures, the outward—but false—perfection? To give up Cord's lazy smile and the way she felt around him—so free yet so grounded?

Juli settled in her seat. She didn't know herself anymore. She only knew the woman she was becoming, here with Cord. And she was starting to like her.

"We both know you're just getting back at me."

God, the nerve of him! Tossing her unruly hair from her face—hair that would look great if it weren't for him—Juli shot Rio a glare. "Now why ever would I do that?"

Heck, *if* she was, he deserved it. Maybe at first she'd initiated things with Cord as a way of sticking it to Rio, but she wasn't so callous that she would make love to a man without feeling. Unless she was drunk and celebrating—*that* didn't count. Oops.

Rio gave her another of those long, sultry looks, the ones that made her feel as if his eyes were x-raying her soul. "You do know I'm sorry things have gone the way they have, don't you? That I never intended for it to fall out like this?"

Right. Sure he didn't. "If I hadn't been in trouble, what then? You would never have shown your face." She pushed her words at him, daring him to deny the truth. "I would've spent the rest of my life thinking you were dead. Rio Tarin—don't you get it? You lied to me. You faked your death! You made me think you *died*!"

Terrific. Now she just sounded hysterical. Juli turned away, not able to stand facing him and thinking about all the what-ifs. The whys.

"In some ways, Juliana, I did."

God, it hurt to hear him talk like that. Made her ache, the same way she ached for Cord, with the need to prove to him that he was wrong. Only this was different. This was personal. *This was Rio.*

Chewing her lower lip, she tried to contemplate how he'd just claimed death—if only a fraction. "No, I can't accept that," she whispered, almost afraid to say it too loudly. "You didn't die, not even a little. You may have lost a part of your life, a part of yourself—I'll give you that much—but you didn't *die*. To say so belittles the memory of my parents. And for your information, I really like Cord."

"You can't."

And there he went again, being a jerkface.

"But..." He hesitated a moment before continuing. "You do have a point regarding your parents. I apologize."

She wanted to ram his apology back in his scarred face. Instead, she addressed his other high-handed comment. "I *do* like Cord—a lot—and I'd ask you to stay out of my business, but since you've already taken the liberty of so over-involving yourself, I'll simply request that you keep your nose out of my love life. It's private."

Conveniently, she left off the heart-wrenching reality that *he* was the center of the love life she wanted him to stay out of, that no matter who she was with, no matter what the circumstances—one-night stand or serious relationship—her heart still revolved around Rio. Memories of his smile. Memories of *him*.

But memories were for dead people.

He snorted in disbelief, swore in Spanish under his breath. "*Love* life?"

*Love?*

"Out!" Even as she said it, she didn't mean it. She wanted him in, *in* her life, *in* her.

God, this situation was out of control already! How could she manage both men for two more weeks without disaster? How could she handle it *ever*? Both of them—

Juli gripped the seat belt, clinging on for dear life despite the fact a turtle could beat them to the highway at this speed.

Seeing Rio again had brought everything back, that was all. The infatuation she'd harbored for years had exploded like a pipe bomb lodged in her chest the moment she'd realized he was her kidnapper, that it was Rio "saving" her from the bad guys.

But she wouldn't love him—she couldn't. Her heart wouldn't be so stupid—not again—to fall for someone who'd just leave. Nope, she wouldn't let herself be such a fool. And lucky for her, she had Cord. A little off, maybe, but safe and solid. And *he* made her feel good in every way a man should—about life, love, and most importantly, in the sack.

"You're not the woman I thought you were," Rio ground out and she saw that his knuckles had whitened on the wheel. "I don't know you. Sleeping with strangers, behaving like a fool."

She didn't answer. He didn't deserve a response.

The silence in the SUV was suffocating. Rio glanced at her then back to the road. Then at her again. Then—

"Watch out!" A deer leapt in front of the car, reflected in the headlights. Rio slammed on his brakes. The animal raced from view, disappearing into the dark woods.

Rio took advantage of the interruption while they were stopped to click on the dome light and check his cell for coverage. While he waited for the signal to register, Juli waited for her heart to calm.

"Still nothing. Damn," he complained, pocketing the phone.

"You would've seen him if you'd been looking—at the road."

"It was a *her*, a doe, not a him." His grin was slow, laced with sincerity. "So now I'm to blame for your distracting beauty?"

There were probably a hundred flippant, angry comments she should make, but tongue-tied as she was, Juli couldn't. All she could do was smile sarcastically and look away, silently basking in the compliment.

"Since we're getting along so famously," Rio continued, turning off the light and accelerating once again. "I suppose there's no better time to bring it up. The evidence, Juliana. I'm asking you to give me what you have on the Benitos."

"No."

"Must you be so stubborn? I'm trying to save your life."

"It's the only bargaining chip I have. I won't let it go or turn it over. I can't." The only place the information on that flash drive was going was on the air—with Juli behind the microphone. And how she was going to work that out, especially looking like this and with the station a million miles away, she had no idea. Except— "Speaking of bargaining, I've agreed to make this call for you. Now I want something in exchange."

"You can name it but that doesn't mean I'll agree."

"I liked you better when you worked for my dad. Then you had to do what I asked."

Rio's head twitched in her direction, and even without seeing him clearly, she knew exactly what he thought of that line of thinking. "I like you better alive and I plan to keep you that—"

"I want to go into town tomorrow," she told him anyway. Maybe she could find a place to buy a digital recorder, make a video and send it to the station. Cord would help her; she trusted him to.

"Absolutely not."

"Rio! I'm staying here without fighting you on it. There's no reason why I shouldn't—"

"There's every reason. Someone could recognize you from the news."

"Out here in the boondocks? I'm not news here—this is Virginia, not DC. I'll wear a scarf and glasses, a pair of Cord's jeans. No one will guess."

"No. Definitely not," he growled. "It's a bad idea."

Ughhhh! He was so damn impossible she wanted to smack him! "And I suppose you're the master of good ideas?"

"I've made enough mistakes in my life. Dear ones. I won't fail you again."

Again? Juli searched his face—his scars—and her mind, trying to understand. Ten years of her life she'd spent believing one story, but what was the truth? How far did Rio's mistakes go?

Why had he stayed away? Why such guilt, such shame? His obsession with protecting her now?

*Why, why, why?*

It seemed questions and uncertainty ruled her life and for once she wanted answers. All of them. She wanted something solid to hold on to, to believe. And now that he'd shown up, not even the events surrounding her parents' death were a sure thing. Just tragic and confusing.

Her mind whirling, the silence strained, it seemed as though they drove forever before they neared the paved road and Rio pulled under some trees and set the parking brake. He opened his phone and flicked on the overhead light. A second later, he smiled. "Good. We finally have coverage." He started dialing. "When Tom answers, I want you—"

"Wait." Juli reached for the phone and snapped it shut. "I want answers first."

He sat back, staring grimly ahead. "Okay. Answers. Just be sure you really want them, *ángelita*."

Dropping the phone in her lap, she turned and looked out into woods that seemed forbidding, echoing her internal darkness. Now that the truth was at hand, Juli was afraid. *Did* she really want to know everything? Maybe being angry at him was easier. Better.

But she needed the truth in order to move on. Had to understand what happened that fateful day, why Rio was here now. There were too many blanks, and if she didn't

fill them in, she'd drive herself crazy wondering what really occurred. Blaming herself for that foolish teenage wish. *Wish they were dead...*

And what if Rio disappeared again? What if he vanished from her life a second time and left her not only grieving but also confused and in the dark – forever?

No. Knowing was better. It had to be.

She undid her seat belt and twisted to face him.

"My parents," she gulped. "The plane crash. *You*. I just don't understand. What happened? You have to tell me."

"I'm to blame." His face crumpled. "It's my fault they're dead. I should have followed my instincts, listened to my gut. Should have stopped that damn plane from ever taking off."

Huh? What did he even have to do with the plane crash? She searched his profile – the unblemished side of his face – finding both shame and deep pain he couldn't hide. And always, more questions. "Your gut didn't kill my parents."

"In a way, it did."

"You weren't in charge. Securing the plane, that would have been Leon's call –"

"No, my job was to protect you." He took the steering wheel in hand, flexing his thumbs against the rubber center. "But that day, I failed everyone, especially you."

"How?"

"Leon and Mike came down with a sudden stomach thing," he said on a sigh. "It was weird – they were fine one minute, camped on the toilet the next. I knew something wasn't right, but your dad, he laughed me off. I still remember him saying, 'What, the anti-abortionists fed my security team laxatives?' But I knew, *I knew*. I could feel that something was off, but I let my pride rule. Didn't want to embarrass myself, make a big stink out of nothing, so I didn't say a damn thing more. Just boarded the plane along with your folks, all the while feeling that it was a mistake. And boom – twenty minutes after takeoff, the plane went down. If I'd just –"

"Stop it." She didn't even need to think about it. He was wrong. She leaned forward and pried his right hand off the wheel. "You didn't put that bomb on board. *You* didn't poison the security team. You didn't make the call after expressing doubts – my father did. One only had to know him to know how stubborn he was when it came to upholding appearances. Don't you see? The crash wasn't your fault. So no more!"

He wrenched his hand from her grasp, curled his fingers into a fist and struck the dashboard. "The blame *is* mine. I was assigned to protect you, your family by extension, and I failed miserably. How I made it out of the wreckage alive is beyond everyone." His voice cracked, strangled the further he went. "My punishment, perhaps – these scars. Failing you."

How could he even think that? God. That's why he'd stayed away all this time? He shouldered all the blame when in fact he was her hero. If only he knew that, if only...

"You didn't fail me," she practically shouted. "You aren't God. You can't know everything."

"That's just it. I did know."

"No, you *suspected*, and my dad didn't listen. That's not your fault. You didn't make the call, he did."

"I should have made him listen."

"If anyone should feel guilty about their deaths, it's me. I'm to blame." Voicing the admission out loud, Juli heard how ridiculous she sounded. "Or if not to blame, mentally responsible. At least I've always thought so." *Always felt the guilt.*

Guilty? She'd been selfish, yes, but seventeen. Her ongoing guilt was as irrational as what Rio was telling her.

"You?" Rio looked taken aback when he dared a glance in her direction. "Why would..."

"That very day..." She swallowed down the instinctive trepidation, finally ready to admit her folly to another. "We'd gotten into an argument before they left. A big one. I wanted to hang out with some friends. They wanted me to stay home and study. It escalated into a shouting match and by the time they left, it was good riddance. I wanted them gone. Wanted them gone...forever." Blinking watery eyes, she confessed the rest, "The day of the crash...I wished my parents were dead."

"Oh Juliana..." He started to shake his head, indicating how very silly her claim. "You weren't responsible, not for a thought. Not for any —"

"Exactly. *Exactly*, Rio." Tossing the cell on the dash, Juli moved onto her knees, reached across the console and took his cheeks in hand, cupping his jaw and forcing him to face her. "I didn't kill them with my mind any more than *you* killed them. You can't make a man like Douglas Reed do a damn thing unless it fits in with his agenda. I sincerely doubt my father would have listened to Leon or Mike either if their worries came between him and arriving in New York on time. I remember how important that fundraiser was to him because he was meeting some of his biggest backers."

"*Ángelita*." The word was filled with pain, pain that she had to erase.

Juli brought her face to his until their noses brushed and their eyes were but an inch apart, and she stared into those black depths with all the strength she had. "*You* need to stop. Please. It's understandable that you would feel guilty but you aren't."

He reached between them, touched her cheek, tried to push her away, but she resisted and he gave up. How was she ever going to get through to him? His name escaped as a heartfelt plea. "Rio..."

"How can you know?" he practically begged and she could tell he wanted to believe her, wanted absolution, but still needed convinced.

"I knew my dad and I know he wouldn't want either one of us blaming ourselves. Neither would my mom." Wrapping her palm in his, she pressed both their hands to



his heart. "No matter how much guilt either of us has carried in here..." She moved their hands up to his head. "We know up here we aren't really responsible."

Her fingers slid free, balling into a fist and she rapped her knuckles on his forehead. *Knock, knock.* "The only thing you *are* responsible for is lying to me for ten years, you sorry-ass."

"Determined to knock some sense into me?" he asked with a self-deprecating smile. His hand returned to nuzzling her cheek.

"Someone has to." She rested her face against his palm, loving the way those big hands held her and made her quiver. Rio had always made her feel like a woman, even when she hadn't been. "Maybe...maybe you survived *for* me. For this."

Destiny. Part of her needed to believe that, to make it true.

"No, for *this*." His lips brushed over hers, testing, and Juli lunged forward, claiming his mouth, kissing him and wishing she could kiss away his hurt, kiss away all the time wasted between them.

Their tongues looped, tangled, and she pressed her mouth harder to his, heat spiraling through her body, demanding more. Demanding *him*, needing him touching her breasts. Her bare skin. Thrusting into her. Making her whole again and giving her the one thing in this world she'd always wanted, had believed she'd never have.

"Rio."

"You say that..." Easing her back by the shoulders, he broke away. "Like..."

"Like what?"

He returned to his seat with a growl, staring out the window. Avoiding her. "So this thing with Cord, you're ending it? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Ending it?" She couldn't do that. Didn't want to.

How could he even ask that of her?

Oh wait. Because if she was going to be with Rio, she couldn't be with Cord. *Couldn't.*

Relationships didn't work that way.

And God help her, she couldn't answer him. She didn't know how to, had never felt so very cornered.

"I see." With a harsh curse, Rio thrust the car door open and stepped out. He stuck his head back in to snarl, "Should've known. You want me plenty, but in the end, the pretty boy's gonna win."

"What!" Juli threw open her door, clambering out and yelling at him over the seats. "Is that what you think this is about? Your scars?"

"Can't say that I blame you—I wouldn't want to look at me the rest of my life either."

He thought her that shallow? Damn him!

The rest of his life?

*The rest of his life!*

Juli stormed around the SUV, thankful for the light seeping past the tinted windows. She met Rio at the back and grabbed hold of his shirt, ripping the tail free of his jeans. Forcing the fabric high, she pointed at the reddened, shiny skin across the left side of his torso. "You know what these are?"

"Ugly," he bit out.

"Grow up!" Juli cried, fisting his shirt and drawing it tight, so mad she wanted to hit him, scar him herself. "You earned these serving my father, giving of yourself to *protect* him. So what if something happened—you can't control every action on the planet. But, damn you, Rio Tarin, these are scars of *honor*, proof you chose to spend your time helping others."

She watched him digest that, nodding, and Juli thought she'd finally gotten through. Then he ruined it all by saying, "Yeah, but I failed. I didn't protect him, did I?"

She hauled off and slapped him in the side, too frustrated to hold back.

He flinched but didn't move away.

"That's for making me think you were dead when you weren't."

She slapped his good side where burnished, tanned skin covered ropy muscles and abs that drove her fantasies. "That's for leaving me with a stranger you knew nothing about—do you know how dangerous that could have been?"

"You're right. I'm sor—"

"Damn you." She didn't let him finish, rearing back to hit him again.

But she didn't have the heart, no matter how angry she was—not Rio, not when he was standing there, taking anything she wanted to dish out. Juli tried to pinch his good side, but her fingers slid off pure muscle, so instead she hooked her thumbs in his belt loops and jerked, causing him to lurch forward. "That's for being *stupid*! Everyone makes mistakes. *Everyone*."

Juli couldn't begin to count her own mistakes, the lost sense of childhood, how she never appreciated the care and love of her parents while she had it—always rebelling, wanting to be free, kicking herself in the butt now because what she wouldn't give to just be able to call her mom and have a good, long chat. To be held in her dad's strong arms and hugged like a little girl. The thought fired her up again. "*Everyone*, and if you aren't man enough to get past yours, then maybe you aren't the man I thought you were." She released his jeans and held out her hand. "Now go get the damn phone and dial whoever it is you need me to speak to."

Without a word, Rio retrieved the phone from the passenger side dashboard, punched a couple of numbers and handed it to her. It was already ringing. Juli held her breath and a second later, a deep voice barked, "Tarin? 'Bout damn time you called." The man paused to cough. "What the hell took you so long?"

"Hello? Uh, Tom?" Juli turned away from Rio's searing black gaze and leaned against the SUV. "This is Juli Reed. Rio said you needed to speak with me..."

"Damn straight. I'm glad you two finally came up for air long enough to call. Tom Jenkins, DCPD. Your disappearance has caused quite a stir. Now before we go any further, I need you to verify that you really are Juli Reed."

"Verify it? How exactly?" Her grip tightened on the phone. This wasn't something she'd expected. "I can give you my driver's license and Social Security numbers."

"No, nothing like that. Anyone can get those if they're determined enough."

There was a shuffle of papers in the background, various noises, another telephone ringing, telling Juli that Tom was likely at the station house, so she better watch what she said. With the list of dirty cops Johnson had given her, reality was, the so-called good guys couldn't be trusted. Maybe not even Tom.

"Then what do you want?" Juli heard the hard edge to her voice but couldn't stop it. It wasn't Tom's fault she was in this mess. But he was Rio's friend. That made her angry with him by association. She looked at Rio. "Does this phone have a camera?"

"Nope," he said and she got the feeling he was enjoying her discomfort. "It's just a phone, *darling*."

Now she really wanted to scar him. Shooting Rio the finger, she growled at Tom, "Then what do you expect me to do? I'm standing out here in the open where just anyone could stroll by," she taunted, "and if Rio is to be believed, I'm in mortal danger. Let's get on with it, shall we?"

Papers rustled again and she swore she heard Tom chuckle. "Why don't you tell me what you had in your freezer. On the top shelf."

"You've been in my house? My *freezer*?" she practically screeched. "Whatever happened to privacy?"

"Hon, you were reported kidnapped. Your place was broken into, the police were called. Now what was in your freezer?"

"How would you even know?"

"Because it was turned inside and out like the rest of your house. The freezer—I'm looking at a picture of it now, along with an inventoried list."

Oh God. The state her home was in didn't bear thinking about, but did she really have to admit her secret obsession out loud?

"The real Juli Reed would know. If you're not her..."

"Bunny Tracks." She saw the question in Rio's eyes and flipped him off again. This was all his fault.

When Tom remained silent, she grudgingly added, "Six cartons."

Evidently satisfied she wasn't some paid impostor Rio picked up off the street—no, he'd picked her up off the parking lot—Tom coughed again and said, "Good enough. Now Rio tells me you're with him by choice. Can you confirm that?"

"That's correct. I'm with Rio. Safe and sound." Her throat tightened painfully with the desire to scream for help and she had to force the words out. "You can drop the missing persons report."

The truth was, she did want to stay at the plantation, for herself as much as Rio and Cord. She just didn't appreciate *having* to stay, being forced to let her investigation go after so much work. Darn it, she had strong evidence, a great story, and it was her right to tell it!

"I'm glad you've backed off. The Benito family isn't one to mess around with. Rio tells me he's keeping you safe, hon, but word on the street is that you're a dead woman."

Dead, huh? Well, they could kiss her hind end.

"Well, now, that's only if they can find me."

"They sure are looking, turning things upside down." He cleared his throat and she got the impression he had more to say.

"Well?" she demanded when nothing else was forthcoming. "Are we done here?"

"Not just yet. Ms. Reed, whatever it is that you have they want, you can trust Rio and you can trust me. We've known each other a long time. Why don't you tell me about it?"

Fat chance of that. "Sorry. No can do."

Tom coughed again. "Your choice, but there is something you should know. WBFE was broken into last night. Your office—"

"My office? What makes you think the break-in had anything to do with me? There's plenty of valuable equipment throughout the station."

"Because it was *your* computer they demolished and *your* filing cabinet they set on fire," Tom responded and her heart sank. "Tito left his calling card."

"Calling card?" *Oh no!* "The flower?"

"Yes," Tom confirmed her worst nightmare. "The security guard was murdered, found with a pink carnation crammed in his pocket."

*No!* Juli's heart thudded in her chest, pounding so furiously it hurt. "Walt?"

She heard more ruffling papers then Tom said gruffly, "Walter Gibbons."

"Oh God." How many nights had she worked late, shared coffee with him at one in the morning before heading home? He was a good man, had a family...grandkids. What's more, he was completely innocent in all this. Her investigation had *nothing* to do with Walt. So why kill him? *To get your attention, Juli.* "Damn. Damn!"

Walt was dead because of her. Dead because of the evidence she wouldn't relinquish. She'd known it from the start—the Benitos were a nasty bunch. She was playing with explosives and others were getting burned. *Murdered.*

Who'd be next? Herself? Or another innocent?

"This isn't going to stop, Ms. Reed, not until you stop it."

Tom was right. This wasn't about the story, not any longer. This was about living or dying. Putting the bad guys away.

Biting her lower lip, Juli reconsidered trusting Tom. Right now he was the only person in authority she could chance talking to. She couldn't safely hand the evidence over any random cop without risking everything, and if Rio thought Tom was a good guy...

*This isn't going to stop...not until you stop it.*

Did she or didn't she? She hadn't risked everything on this investigation to let it all go to pot. But Walt's death wasn't just on the Benitos' hands. It was on hers. Those were *her* files Walt had died protecting.

"I do have evidence," she blurted. "I'll turn it over. I'll testify, help get them put away." A knot of fear rose up in her throat and she regretted the offer the moment she made it.

"Good girl. We need to meet. Tell me where you're staying and I'll come get you."

Reveal her location? *Testify?*

What was she thinking? She was marked already...

Then again, if she didn't, where did that leave her, leave the case? Surely Walt's family would want justice.

Rio snatched the phone from her and pressed it to his chest. She winced at the ire in his eyes. "If you think they won't be able to reach you from the inside, you're fooling yourself. Testify and you're sentencing yourself to death."

Rio walked away, leaving her standing there. Terrified and shaking.

Never had she been more lost, more scared and unsure of herself or the decisions she needed to make.

God help her, Rio was right. He'd been right all along.

What had she done? More importantly, what did she do now?

Rio brought the phone to his ear, holding it so tight it was a wonder it didn't snap in two. "Tom? That's all for now."

"But—"

"She's safe," Rio snarled, ready to throttle Juliana for putting him in this position. "But we both know she won't be if the Benitos get a whiff of her location. Now close in and arrest those bastards yourself. Better yet, shoot 'em dead, but leave Ju—"

"Damn you," Tom all but howled. "They know she's holding something back. If she doesn't turn the evidence over and go into protective custody, her days are numbered and you know it."

"No. What I know is you better get the hell off the phone and start doing your job. Now what in the hell are Bunny Tracks?"

"Ask your little sack bunny, buddy. And while you're at it, find out what she's hiding. It'll go better for everyone."

As if he had any other choice.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Impossible," Juli hissed at herself, flopping over and giving the pillow a good punch. She couldn't sleep, couldn't even lie still, so how in the world Cord could be on his side of the bed snoring soundly was beyond her. At least one of them was enjoying some quality ZZZZs. After the way Cord had woken up screaming the first few nights, it was gratifying to see him sleep straight through 'til morning.

It would be more gratifying if she were zonked out with him.

Juli punched the pillow again.

She had to get up, do *something* before she went crazy thinking about the Benitos and Walt.

About Cord and Rio. Maybe she'd make them breakfast—even she could pour cereal in a bowl.

How quaint. Cooking for the *two* men in her life.

Swearing under her breath, Juli threw the covers on top of Cord and swung her feet to the floor. Shadowy hints of dawn filtered their way through the makeshift curtain—an old sheet she'd thrown over the uncovered window. Juli brushed aside the thin fabric to look out over the rolling fields of Willow Creek.

Based on the lighter shade of indigo tinting the horizon, the sun was about to make its daily appearance. Soon, faint streaks of golden light would be penetrating the woods surrounding the house, glinting off the fallow fields, and for once Juli wanted to see it. She'd never watched the sunrise here—had never watched the sunrise anywhere. She was always up too late to bother with rising early. Never had anyone to share it with either.

Ironically, now she had two men—and still no one to share it with. Cord was sleeping, Rio was mad at her. But she was tired of missing the sunrise, livid at herself for dragging through life so long. Working, proving herself, sensational exposés—dildos and overdrinking and late nights alone—that wasn't living. Neither was celebrating the biggest award of her career by nearly screwing a stranger—an award she really didn't give a fig about, not anymore.

Wasting her life, going through the motions on autopilot, dreaming of the past...none of that was living.

Painting was. Laughing was. Saving the world and helping people. Watching the sunrise, even alone.

And dammit, the Benitos weren't going to take any of that away from her. She wasn't going to take it away from herself.

Charged, Juli bolted from the bedroom. She flew down the stairs and out onto the porch, careful to avoid letting the screen door slam back with its usual clang. Breathing heavy, she rotated, ready to face the coming day.

And instead found herself facing Rio.

## Chapter Nineteen

“*Ángelita*. You’re up early.” Holding a bracing cup of black chai, Rio turned in place and surveyed the bonus sight of Juliana joining him for his morning ritual. Fortunately, he’d been stationed outside since the sky was ink dark and now that dawn was approaching, he could see her clearly. Eyes wide as if she’d seen a ghost, blonde hair all wild, chest lifting and falling in exaggerated heaves.

Barefoot, she wore clingy long johns – *Cord’s* long johns, no doubt, both the top and bottoms. The soft knit hugged her breasts, showcasing the peaks of her hardened nipples, drawing his gaze. He couldn’t look away. Rio’s mouth watered at the thought of encircling those pebbled little buds. His cock jerked to life, threatening to do damage to his sweatpants.

How the sight of her made him yearn. Made him think of yesterday when he’d watched her and Cord making love. Made him want to observe again. Or better yet, participate.

*With them?* Hell, one look at her tits embraced by long johns and his mind was in the gutter.

“Are you staring at my breasts?” Juliana thrust her chest out, as if daring him to deny it.

“Can’t help it.” Rio shrugged and jerked his gaze up to her face. “With all the noise coming from the bedroom last night, I figured you’d both sleep until noon.”

“You were listening?”

“Again, couldn’t help it.”

After sticking her tongue out, Juliana turned to go back inside. He heard her mutter, “Couldn’t sleep, but judging by the way this day is starting, I should’ve stayed in bed,” just in time to prop his hand on the screen door before it opened. Trapping her on the porch. With him.

“Ah, see now? If you were in *my* bed, you’d have been too tired not to sleep.” Instead, she was letting a boy do the job. Served her right.

Juliana whirled back around, glaring daggers. The points on those luscious breasts of hers were approaching lethal weapon status too. Rio removed his hand and grinned, happy to be her target as she laid into him. “For your information, Cord brings forth so much *excitement* in me that *I* wore him out. But you should know that since you were listening in.”

“Ouch.” He’d rather she was lying under him.

Ouch again. Why keep torturing himself?

Wincing, Rio chose to look beyond the yard, anticipating the array of pinks, oranges and blues that would soon be streaking across the sky, backlit by the sun rising up over the golden fields. "Don't miss the sunrise on my account."

*Don't go back to bed with Cord.*

God, what a mess. In order to keep from saying something else he'd regret, Rio took a long swig of his spicy tea.

Deep down, he knew Juliana was making the choice she had to, choosing Cord over him. He was too scarred, too damaged for a woman like her, and though it didn't make losing her any easier, Juliana did claim to really like Cord. So maybe she did. He didn't own her, couldn't blame her.

But still it smarted. Smarted? Shoot, more like she'd put a slug in his heart. Hurt like nothing he'd ever known, this rejection. It was no wonder he'd stayed away so long. It was much easier not knowing, being able to pretend. Much easier.

Slowly, Rio lowered himself to the porch, sitting on wooden planks cold from a long fall night. As if his body weren't stiff enough already. His left side never fared well in cooler weather. His cock? Never fared well around Juliana.

Hell, it'd be easier to think *that* part of him was broken, but no, along with the light in his life, Juliana put the starch back in his erection. He folded his legs, one propped in front of him, the other angled underneath and did up the buttons of his flannel shirt one-handed – wasn't sure if he was locking in his body heat or blocking out Juliana's inquisitive gaze.

Either way, he felt more comfortable. Rio looked out at the sky and savored another long sip of his tea. Bittersweet, just as his renewed contact with Juliana.

He wished he could say he was enjoying this tea more than he'd enjoyed watching her make love to another man.

And why wasn't she spouting off some sarcastic comment already? Why was she just standing silently behind him? Doing what? Staring? Wishing she could conk him on the head and be done with it? Wishing he was Cord? Maybe stroking her breasts? Playing with her nipples?

Rio cleared his throat, not sure how much more he could take. "You just going to stand there, watching me? Either go back inside or settle in, *ángelita*. I can't tolerate you hovering."

"Rio." Juliana practically choked on his name. Another moment passed without her saying anything or budging an inch.

"Juliana?"

"You're right." Her softly spoken words floated overhead.

And what man didn't like the sound of that?

He angled his head and looked up at her, noting the way she chewed her lower lip, hugged her chest—hiding those pointy nipples, he'd bet—standing there as if she weren't sure which way to turn. Inside, back with Cord. Outside, here with him.



So his little angel was confused? Well, that made two of them. Maybe three.

"Talk to me," he encouraged, saluting her with his mug. "Tell me what I'm right about."

"I'm in danger and I'm scared. I can't believe Walt is dead. I wish...I wish it didn't have to be like this. I wish you'd listen to me, trust me." She huffed out a breath. "I wish I could trust you. And —"

He didn't want to hear what *and* was because surely it had something to do with Cord.

"Come here." He waved her toward him, catching her arm when she took a step forward. Setting his tea aside, he tugged her onto his lap.

"Rio! Your injuries!" She tried to jump back up. "You can't hold me like this. What if I hurt you?"

What did she take him for? A pansy-ass weakling? He held tight. "*Por Dios*, woman. Calm yourself. It's not like I'm carrying you across the threshold!"

*Now why had he said that?*

"But —"

"Old injuries or not, have you forgotten who wrestled you into the back of his vehicle?"

She stopped fighting but didn't relax. "I was drunk."

"Yes, well, I was determined. Am now too."

Rio still had a grip on her hand. He turned it over, admiring the delicate bones, intricate blood vessel structure, the deceptive strength. The real Juliana was nothing like the person he'd expected to encounter after years of watching her on television.

The crackerjack reporter—that was only the packaging the station sold. But one thing about Juliana hadn't changed—inside, she was steel. She had a heart of gold but a will that could cut like diamonds, and as long as she was pissed at him, he'd accomplish nothing. Making demands of her was the equivalent of butting heads. There'd be no reasoning, no securing whatever she had on the Benitos, no convincing her that she had to give up her life in DC or at least her current investigation.

"I shouldn't be doing this," she protested weakly, staying stiff.

Rio ignored her. He coiled his arms over her chest and hauled her close, resting his chin atop her head. He didn't want another argument, didn't want to bring up anything that would put them at odds again. Neither did he want them avoiding each other all day long. "Tell you what. How about we agree to a truce?"

"Truce?" She made a small sound of satisfaction, relaxed against him a fraction. "I like the sound of that. Does this mean no more bullying me about the evidence?"

"Unless you're in the mood to hand it over."

"I just...can't."

"Then let's not talk about it. Not today."

In the end, this wasn't about a love triangle. This was about her safety and out here they were safe. No one would find them, not even the cops. So he was giving it a rest, biding his time to earn that trust she wanted to give him.

And he had to start by giving her his. Trust. Small word for such an important thing.

"Let's just be friends today. All of us. Together," he told her. "I've been thinking things over this morning. Sure is easy to do in the stillness," he mused, knowing he'd probably shock her long johns off with his next statement. "Perhaps it would be okay if you go into town with us. There's a campground not too far from here—I passed it on the highway. We'll say we're campers. Juliana Reed the rustic outdoorswoman will look nothing like Juli Reed the reporter. We'll stuff your hair under a baseball cap, put you in some overalls, call you Angel for the day..."

Juliana giggled. "A ball cap? Overalls? Oh God," she hiccupped. "Let's hope this town doesn't have fashion police."

"You never know, you might look cute." Rio unhooked his arms and stole a lock of her hair, rubbing it between his fingers. Soft, silky. Free of sticky gel. He'd never seen Juliana more beautiful than she was right now, hair in careless disarray, wearing long johns, painted toes—bare. "I for one would like to see it."

"Really?" She twisted in his arms. Her smile nearly knocked him out. "I'm surprised to hear to you say that."

"I like women who are comfortable being dressed down and casual. It's earthy. You...you carry off earthy very well." He nuzzled her neck. "You smell good too. Kind of flowery."

He lifted a handful of her hair, inhaling along her nape.

"It's the perfume you brought. I put it on last night." The words were a whispered confession.

After the way she'd thrown his watch back in his face... "Thank you."

Crooking her neck, she searched his eyes. "I, um—God."

Her hair fell from his hands. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just, I was so embarrassed by my appearance when you came home yesterday. I was dying for heels and a pushup bra."

At the mention of a bra, he almost told her how great she looked out of one. He swallowed that comment in the nick of time, telling her truthfully, "You don't need those things. I can see why you'd lean on them—it's part of your image, the persona you project to the world, but you're beautiful just as you are. I mean that."

"So are you." She reached up, gently brushing a finger over the scarred flesh marring the left side of his face. "And I mean that."

Rio found himself leaning into her touch, wanting more. "You almost make me believe it, *ángelita*."

"You should." The sweet curve of her lips matched the joy in her eyes. "Thank you for letting me go into town. For the truce. It means a lot."

Then Juliana did what he'd been wanting her to do since that first night he'd kidnapped her. She melted against him, let him hold her, and Rio knew he was making the right decision. For both of them.

"Oops, we almost missed it," she murmured, looking out toward the horizon. "Wow. The sunrise is beautiful,"

"It pales in comparison." *To you.*

Neither of them spoke again until the sun had risen above the treetops. They just sat there, basking in the splendor of the impending day, comforted in each other's arms. Feeling, enjoying, *being*.

Juli never wanted it to end, this moment, this day. The truce.

Did Rio have any idea how very much it meant to her? How very much his trust mattered?

Heck, she was starting to like him all over again. Not just fantasize about him and lust after him, but really like him.

Her only concern was that it wouldn't last—that he'd become a jerk again. Disappear again.

"Cord will be up soon," she said, trying to gauge Rio's reaction when she mentioned her lover's name, expecting anger. She was wrong.

"Pity he slept through the sunrise. Best one I've seen in ages."

"Me too. Um, I suppose I should fix something for breakfast."

"Nah, let Cord do it. We'll say it's his turn for sleeping in."

"Works for me," Juli said on a soft laugh.

Rio cupped the back of her neck and pinched her nape, shifting her until her cheek rested against his chest. "Give me five more minutes."

"Okay." She listened to the thudding of his heart as her head rose and fell with each steady breath. Three minutes. Five. Ten. She sat there, eyes closed, listening. Dreaming.

Finally a bug *bzzzzzd* by, interrupting the stillness. "You do realize the beauty of the sunrise is long gone by now. Not that I've been able to see it like this."

"The beauty is in my arms."

Juli sighed, snuggled in. She didn't remember Rio being such a sweet talker, but if he kept it up...

No, she didn't want to think about what she might do. Didn't want to think about this crazy situation, stuck between two men. Wanting...

She slid her palm over his chest and didn't discipline her fingers when they eased right between a couple of buttons on his shirt and settled against a soft pelt of hair

covering a hard pec. She sighed more deeply. This position was likely to get her in trouble—or lead to any number of interesting things.

*Truce. Let's be friends today.* Right. "The beauty needs entertainment. Talk to me."

"About what?"

She shrugged, told her fingers to move—they didn't—and murmured, "So you're a real estate agent now. What made you go that route?"

"Ah, always the investigator."

At his uninformative response, her fingers flinched without her permission, nails digging into warm muscle.

Other than clearing his throat, Rio didn't move. But her fingers did. Just a little closer toward his nipple. Was that his heart she felt pounding beneath her hand?

"Ah." That was definitely him she felt swallowing. "Being a bodyguard was out—my injuries were extensive enough that I didn't think I could handle the job, even if I could gain the strength or mobility back. Running, any type of fast movement—I'm just not up to par anymore. One of my sisters is an agent back in San Antonio. She suggested I consider it and I've always liked houses, so real estate seemed a good fit."

"What is it about houses that you like?" she prodded, edging her fingers directly over his nipple and scooting deeper between his legs so that she sat directly on the porch and the bugle of his cock pressed against her butt.

Playing with fire. She must want to get burned.

"Well, not houses." Rio must think it had grown hot too. He sounded as if he were strangling from aroused-nipple-induced dry-throat syndrome and his entire body had turned to granite. "Homes," he whispered, though it came out a croak when one of his buttons edged free, allowing her hand greater access. "I like seeing them filled up, decorated. Full of life. I like knowing that by selling a new couple or a family a house, I'm giving them the start on a home."

"Aw, that's awfully sweet." So was the way his pectoral twitched beneath her hand.

"And then there's the money. It's good. At least it was."

"That's right—the housing market took a dive recently." So did her hand, diving toward his hair-roughened abs. "I did a report on it."

"I know," he said, and it sounded as if she had both hands around his vocal cords—or balls—rather than innocently exploring his stomach with only one. "I saw it."

Innocently? Who was she kidding? Juli was so hot she was ready to self-combust. Maybe all the pussy juice between her legs could put out the fire?

And then she realized what he'd just admitted. "Seen everything I've done, have you?"

"Haven't missed a single report."

Her hand stilled. "You been stalkin' me, Mr. Real Estate Man?"

"Only electronically."

Nails digging in enough to draw blood, Juli forced out, "Surveillance?"

He coughed, dislodging her hand. "TiVo."

*Bastard.* Hiding himself all those years –

But no. She wouldn't – couldn't – be irritated. Not today. There was the truce, after all. And despite her ire, his arms felt too darn comfortable and comforting to give up now. Juli pulled her hand from his shirt, did up the rogue button and rested it in her lap along with her other one. Said other hand was feeling woefully neglected at the moment so she wrapped it in the heat of the one that had just been snuggled against heaven. Hairy heaven. Hard heaven.

And truth tell, no matter how much horny heaven had just visited her loins, no matter how aggravated she was at the thought of him watching her for years without exposing himself – now didn't that bring to mind all sorts of heavenly images? – she was getting too much to stop their discussion now.

"So..." Juli tried to think of the best way to ask her next question but instead realized her previously neglected hand had found its way to his leg and was tracing a path down the inside seam of his sweats.

Hard muscle heaven. Now her other hand felt happy.

But Juli still had the devil of a time concentrating. "Ah, you never married, I assume. Any particular reason why?"

"Never found a woman who could hold a candle to you."

And she just melted into a puddle of wax.

Warmed from her head to his toes – which she'd just explored – Juli recalled her happy hands and hugged him, wrapping her arms under his and holding tight.

"But...you want your own home, right?" she ventured.

"And a family. Very much." He paused a moment – his words, his breathing. Just...stopped. "There're times when I think I won't ever have one."

Juli swallowed and nodded against his chest, feeling his pain. "Me too."

"You? Come now. There's no reason why a beautiful woman like you shouldn't have it all."

"Yeah." But to Juli, she couldn't have kids if she wasn't in a committed relationship, preferably married, and so far that had always seemed out of reach.

She also couldn't have kids while bad guys were determined to kill her. Another problem, which led to her job. Crazy as it sounded, being an investigative reporter was too dangerous – not to mention time-consuming – if she wanted to be a really good mom.

And her heart told her she still did.

"I've confessed enough." Rio turned the tables. "What happened to that? Why aren't you living happy in the suburbs with two point five ankle-biters of your own and a drooling dog?"

"Been too busy." Her answer sprang to her lips without thought. "Being out here has made me realize one big thing. No television, no phone, no internet equals no *distractions*. I've had time to contemplate things I never even thought about before. It's made me see that I became so caught up in life, I forgot to live. Cord and I were talking the other day and do you know I've never even been to Disneyland? *Disneyland!*"

"Not as though it's a requirement."

"But *still*." Her back was starting to complain so Juli relaxed her grip around his torso and stretched.

As if taking that as a sign, Rio kissed her ear and guided her to sit next to him on the step. "I just thought of something. Be right back." He pushed to his feet and headed out into the yard toward his SUV. Swinging open the driver's side door, he dug around a moment then jogged back to her, wielding a Redskins cap.

Oh good grief. Wearing a baseball cap was bad enough, but the Redskins? Why couldn't Rio support a team with a cute mascot? Wasn't there a wildcat or something? She'd much rather wear that on her head.

"Here. For today." He climbed the steps two at a time and plunked the hat on her. "Perfect."

"I can't believe I'm going out in public like this."

"Adorable, baby." He winked. "So tell me..." Standing before her, his hands rested on his hips nonchalantly, all macho-like. "Cord – he was good to you while I was gone? He treated you right?"

*Uh-oh*. She glanced up at him under the brim of the hat. "You have to ask?"

"I have to ask."

"He's been quite the gentleman." *Out of bed*. "But I wish..." She bit her tongue before the rest of her sentence slipped out.

"What?"

Juli knew it was wrong to talk about Cord and his problems, but she just couldn't help herself. Rio, he'd been in the Marines. Maybe he'd know what to do, how to help.

"He's so sad. Messed up, bad dreams and stuff. I'm certain he has PTSD, but he won't talk about it with me. How can I help him?"

"You can't."

"I have to."

"You can't fix him, Juliana."

"I *know* that. He needs a counselor, but I still want to help."

"Fine." Rio nodded somberly, his hands falling from his hips. He sat down on the step below her. "I'll talk to him."

"You'd do that?" His hat slid forward, blinding her, and Juli pushed it back. "Too big."

"Hey, I may not like him stealing my girl, but he did me a big favor." Rio took the hat from her head, adjusting the straps on the back. "Besides, I kinda like the guy. *If* it weren't for him stealing my girl."

She *kinda* liked the way Rio claimed her as his. Not once but twice. And she really liked the way the thought seemed to bug him. Juli smiled—not even advertising the Redskins all day could sour her mood now. "He is rather magnetic, isn't he?"

Rio returned the snug-fitting cap to her head, wiggling it in place. "There. Now it won't fall off."

Footsteps skidded across the hardwood floor in the front hall. The screen door squeaked open. "Magnetic, huh? Now you've got to be talkin' 'bout me."

Caught. The blood rushed so fast to Juli's face her toes froze. "What are you doing there? How much did you hear?"

Cord shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans, flashing her a lopsided smile. "Eavesdroppin', darlin'," he said without answering. "Now who's gonna fix my breakfast?"

"You are!" they both answered in unison.

Standing, Juli brushed the dust from her butt. "Did you hear—Rio is letting me go into town today. We're all going."

Cord turned to Rio. "You sure about that?"

"It was your idea!" Juli said.

"An' how would you know that?"

"*Eavesdropping*, darlin'."

\* \* \* \* \*

"*Aieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!* Cord! Rio!"

Juli's scream pierced the air. His fingers fumbled and Cord's chocolate and marshmallow S'mores Pop Tart flew through the air and landed on the kitchen floor. His breakfast crumbled into a gooey mess under his feet when Juli yelled again and he took off after her. Rio was outside, readying the SUV for their trip into town and Cord knew it was up to him to save the day, and boy was he up for the challenge.

"*Aii!*"

Good God! She sounded as if she were being murdered! Cord charged from the kitchen, his heart pounding in his ears as he followed Juli's glass-shattering cries.

"Hold on, baby! I'm comin'!" Terror lending speed to his actions, Cord raced up the stairs, all the while wondering what horrible sight he'd find—Juli doubled over in agony, her appendix ruptured and needing emergency assistance. Juli, clutching her head as it bled all over the floor, having bonked it on the fireplace mantel. Juli, crying her eyes out because she wanted two very different men and had decided to tell Cord that he'd lost and she was brokenhearted and dying inside.

He'd hate to have to punch out Rio. His knuckles were still tender from their first fight, not to mention the blow he'd delivered the cradle.

"Eeeeeeeeeee!"

Dammit. Now he was yelling too.

"What happened? Jules, you okay?" Flinging open the door with a resonating bang, he rushed inside his bedroom.

Only to find her bouncing up and down on the bed, wearing nothing but that Redskins cap he'd seen Rio give her earlier, swinging a pair of his overalls around like a madwoman.

"Mouse! Mouse!" Breasts flailing, she did the ants-in-her-pants dance, except *she wasn't wearing any pants!* "Mouse!"

Cord's cock jumped to attention.

He glanced down just as the petrified mouse scuttled between his legs, fleeing the room and her screeching. "Geez, you scared the little guy to death."

And she got him horny faster than he could say *yee haw!* All in a day's work for a woman, he guessed.

Mouth agape, she gawked at him as if he'd gone bonkers. "It was in the overalls. *In them!*"

"Hmmm. And you're not." Cord sauntered to the bedside, drinking in the sight of her. Long and lean. Curvy in all the right places. There was nothing like bouncing breasts to get him going.

Her hands went to her hips. "Thank you for the observation."

Smart aleck.

"Don't just stand there!" she shrieked, becoming all worked up again when he didn't move. "Kill him. Save me!"

Behind him, Cord heard the floor creak and knew without looking that Rio had heard her screams as well. That he was standing in the doorway, likely gettin' an eyeful.

Juli, however, didn't show the slightest sign that she was aware of Rio's presence.

"Cord!" She was shaking and shimmying, bouncing those glorious tits all over the place – and right in his face. Oh yeah, he was up for the challenge.

"You know, angel, I wasted a perfectly good Pop Tart to save you." Way Cord saw it, he was due some make-up sex. Observer included.

What could he say? He'd always been a ham – loved to be the center of attention – and Rio watching them yesterday, well, that had made him feel extra aroused for some crazy reason. Rio seemed to enjoy it too. And Juli? She might have feigned outrage when she found out, but Cord could tell the notion turned her on. What was the harm in trying again? Pleasin' them all?

Juli hopped on the bed. *Bouncing breasts again.* "We have Pop Tarts?"



"Rio brought them. S'mores. Strawberry. Cookie Dough. Take your pick." Cord put his hands up, ready to grab hold and squeeze those luscious mounds—

"And you've been holding out on me? You dirty rat!" Juli swung the overalls, smacking him in the chest with the flying legs. "I haven't had chocolate in ages!"

Cord caught the denim in his fist, giving the overalls a mighty tug that yanked her down onto the mattress.

"Hey!"

"So which will it be? A dirty rat in your bed or one less mouse in the house?"

The heat in her eyes gave away that she knew exactly what he was asking and was all for a little bouncing-mattress fun. Cord had himself a mouse to thank later.

Juli tossed the overalls to the side and pointed one long leg straight in the air. "Did you notice? I shaved this morning." She waved that smooth leg in his face and Cord started undressing. "Put on some lotion too. Rio brought me some lavender stuff that smells divine."

Cord debated with himself. Should he go down on her first, lap up the pussy juice now glistening over her flushed cunt? Should he pull her up and force her to suck him? Nah, he didn't want to wait and there was no need to draw Rio's attention to Cord's dick.

His love muscle took a curve to the left when it should've gone straight and while none of Cord's partners had ever complained, neither had he ever put himself on blatant display. There was something about Juli...made him lose his mind. Right now he just wanted to lose his load.

In ten seconds flat Cord was naked, sheathed in a condom and on top of her welcoming body, kissing her beneath the annoying brim of the Redskins cap. God, that team sucked. Cord was a Carolina Panthers fan through and through, had been since the team started. Maybe he'd buy her a Panthers cap when they went into town later, show Rio who was boss. That thought only fired his desire.

Plunging his tongue into her mouth hungrily, he palmed her right breast, tweaked her hardened nipple. She squealed in delight. "More," she begged, talking into his mouth between kisses. "More."

So she liked him pulling on her nipple, eh?

Nudging his cock between her legs, he let it rest against her heat. Eager as he was to take her, he intended to show Rio what it really took to love a woman like Juli.

It took *him*. And a handful of being in charge, of driving Juli's body just to the edge of pain without crossing over—Juli loved it and Cord knew it. They were made for each other.

He kissed her deeper, pulling on her nipple until she had to arch against him or risk losing it. She whimpered in his mouth and he felt her wetness run along his cock like a river. Harder, he tugged on that pert little gem until she was going wild beneath him.

Again, the pain-in-the-ass cap hit his face, and Juli reached up to remove it.

Cord caught her hand and broke free from kissing her. "No. Leave it on."

She pushed her body against him. "You think it's sexy?"

Did he ever! Knowing it was all she wore, knowing they had an audience. "Rio does," he murmured, kissing along her neck. Delicious, decadent...much better than a Pop Tart.

"Hmmm? Rio?"

"Forget I said anything." Cord kissed his way down her body and off the bed until he was standing next to her. He lifted Juli by her ankles, raising her right off the mattress and balancing each of her legs on either side of his neck. Her bare toes played with his ears and Cord slapped the side of her thigh. "None of that now. Ain't no time for ticklin', not if you want me."

"Oh God. I want you." He hadn't needed her words—but it was still nice to hear them—her body had already told him all he needed to know. Her pussy juice ran thick between the crevice of her legs. Her breasts swayed upside down due to gravity, but her grin was 100% right side up. Due to his upcoming cock, he liked to think.

Cord positioned himself and plunged into her, piercing *his* woman. He was marking his territory.

Take that, old man. And this...

"On second thought—" Cord reached down and stole Rio's hat, plopping it on *his* head. Peering over his shoulder, he found Rio's gaze and locked with it just as he reached underneath Juli and slapped her ass sharply. "Ride me, darlin'. Like a proper Redskins fan should."

"I hate...the Redskins," she panted, arching upward into his thrusts. "And I can't...can't ride you unless I'm...on top."

Cord smacked that fine behind even harder. Felt his cock swell even longer.

Rio winced when she cried out, but he didn't make a move, didn't try to interfere or stop Cord.

Grinning, Cord gave him a wink and turned back to focus his full attention on Juli. "So you want to ride me your way, eh, darlin'?"

Cord angled his body and fell back onto the mattress, bringing her with him and keeping his feet pointed toward the door. Juli scrambled to get her legs down and back under her, sliding off him with a loud slurp that echoed in the room but coming back just as quickly when she climbed over him, straddling his cock and taking it back inside that fine pussy of hers.

"Oh yeah, fuck me like you ain't had it in months, show me that you need it. Show me how a sweet, overall-wearing country gal isn't afraid of any little mouse or any long, stiff snake," he encouraged, bucking into her as she straightened, sitting tall and propping her feet at his sides. Up, down, up, down...Juli worked her legs as though she were doing squats over him. Giving that pussy a real workout, just as he'd ordered. His cock too.

And Rio's eyes.

Skimming his hand up her torso, Cord cupped her breasts and massaged them, running his thumbs over her nipples, squeezing them a little more, having the time of his life as Juli moaned and moved. Humped and grinded.

"Faster, darlin'," he urged. "Climax for me."

For Rio.

"Oh God."

"Come on now." He pinched her nipples harder, hard enough to hurt—if she wanted him to stop then she best obey. "Come for me just like I like it. Nice and loud, angel. I want to hear it."

*Harder, harder, faster, faster...*

Juli shouted at the top of her lungs, assuring no mouse would ever come into this room again. Her pussy rippled and clamped around his cock, holding him so damn tight he had to release her nipples and grab on to the sheets, bracing himself against her lungs as she came and he did too, joining in her screams just for the hell of it.

Their ecstasy rebounded within the bedroom walls, increasing and becoming louder until ceasing in a shuddering halt. Silence.

Juli collapsed. Their breathing was heavy and united. "My thighs. They burn. But my pussy feels terrific." She rolled off him, onto the mattress and looked straight at Rio.

She gulped. So he *was* there. She'd started to suspect but had doubted it as loud as Cord encouraged her to be. Unable to keep the satisfaction from her voice, Juli nevertheless questioned, "*Rio?*"

Rio stood there, still as a statue. "I heard screams," he said.

He sure had.

## Chapter Twenty

Cap on, hair stuffed under, too-large overalls dangling from her body – at least they were *on* now – and dark sunglasses in her pocket, Juli stood in the middle of the front yard and stared at Rio's SUV. *Crapola.*

Door hanging open, Rio rested his hands on the roof, waiting. The *ding-ding-ding* of the vehicle's door-ajar alarm chimed through the air. Juli's teeth dug into her lower lip. Where was Cord? He was taking long enough. Rio had already blared the horn twice.

So she stood there like an idiot, not certain whether to plant her behind in the front passenger seat or in the back. If she took the front, Cord would be the third wheel in the back. If she took the back and Cord joined her, Rio would be the third wheel in the front.

*Crap, crap, crap.*

Rio's fingers drummed on the roof. *Thap, thap, thap.* "You suddenly develop a fear of riding?"

Huh? Juli tilted her head, looking at him as if he were the fool, until she realized what he meant.

"No...no of course not," she stammered, forcing her feet into motion. "Just making a mental list. Worried I might forget something."

Chin up, fake smile in place, she walked slower than she ever had in her life. God, was she really struggling over something so silly? Why was she so nervous? Couldn't be because she'd just made love to Cord *while Rio watched*, could it? And – dare she admit it – that suspecting he was observing them only made her scream louder, come harder?

"Well, get a move on, would you?" Rio ducked into the driver's seat and gunned the engine. "And holler at that boyfriend of yours to hurry up."

After what had happened – Rio catching her and Cord like that *again* – she'd expected some sort of fiasco when it was over. A fistfight, jealous words. Awkwardness at the very least.

Instead, they'd both gone about dressing as if it were a normal day and Juli had done her best to play along. Not easy when she was afraid a mouse might pop out any second. Not easy when her body thrummed in the aftermath of spankin' great sex. Not easy when her heart felt split in two...

Just go to the car, she told herself, do what comes naturally. Except the thought of *doing* both these men came naturally. *CRAP-O-LA!*

While she was ordering her trembling legs to move forth and sit, Cord came zooming past carrying two cigar boxes overflowing with cash.

"Shotgun!" he called, leaving her in his dust and hopping into the front seat. The door slammed shut.

Well, that settled that. *She* was the third wheel.

Picking up the pace, Juli jogged to the vehicle, opening the door and sliding into the backseat. "Okay, let's go." She slipped the glasses on as Rio took off down the lane. "How's my disguise?"

He glanced in the rearview mirror, nodding his approval. "I hardly recognize you myself."

Cord crooked his neck to look back at her and shrugged. "You look like Juli to me."

She took the glasses off.

"Why'd you take so long, anyway?" Rio asked Cord. "You were in the barn almost an hour and I know you weren't jerking off."

Cord flipped back the lid to one of the cigar boxes, revealing a messy, jam-packed wad of cash. "Had to tape a lot of it."

"Tape? What'd you do, kid, rob a bank?"

"Nope." The lid fell shut. "Let's just say it's my inheritance."

Inheritance? Oh no it wasn't. That was the money she'd found him shredding, the money he'd earned serving his country, and she was proud that he'd taped the pieces together and was going to spend it. Why should it go to waste?

Maybe Cord was starting to win the battle against some of his demons. She sure hoped so.

"So, junior," Rio asked. "What're your plans while we're in town? Any special stops you need me to make?"

"Nope. After today I'll be independent. I plan on buying a car, picking up some supplies on my own. And I have some personal things to take care of, but thanks for asking. Mighty nice of you, *Senior* Tarin. Glad to see that ancient brain of yours is operating on all cylinders."

Juli thought she heard Rio groan but he was smiling, so she couldn't be sure.

"If you're buying some wheels, then you'll be good to go. You know..." Rio paused, shot Juli a quick look in the mirror, turned back to the road, scratched his chin, drummed his fingers on the wheel, glanced at her again.

What was he so uncomfortable about? A second later, she knew.

"You know...I dealt with war myself, Cord. So I just want to throw it out there—it'd be a mighty good idea to get yourself someone to talk to. A counselor."

Forget crap. Oh *shit*...

Juli held her breath, waiting for Cord's response. When Rio had offered to talk to him, she hadn't expected him to do it right in front of her. Some things should stay between men, right?

Cord took a few seconds to respond. "What business is it of yours?"

Rio jerked his thumb over his shoulder, fingering her deliberately. "I've a vested interest in your sanity."

Her heart changed tune, beating to the drum of Rio's concern. No man had ever looked out for her as he did, cared about her so passionately.

No man that was, except Cord.

Juli leaned forward and touched Cord's shoulder. He was beyond tense. "Talking to someone is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yeah well, don't worry. I'm as sane as I'll ever be and I have things under control." Cord flashed them both one of his lopsided, meant-to-charm smiles and her hand fell away. "I promise." He started tapping his foot impatiently, creating a pitter-patter against the rubber floor mat. "Can't you drive faster than this, old man?"

The question only seemed to make Rio drive slower. "It's a dirt lane."

"So? Little dust ain't gonna hurt this SUV. Four-wheel drive—it's meant for bad roads."

"Wildlife," Juli piped up. "He doesn't want to hit any deer."

"Or mice," Rio added, and she could've kicked him.

"Yeah, but he's still driving like a girl."

"Hey!" Juli protested.

"You want to drive, badass?" Rio asked in such a tone, Juli wondered if the truce was over before it really began.

"Nah." Cord flicked on the radio, turning through the stations and offering commentary on each. "Country...pure crap these days. Disco...I'd rather be back in Iraq. Indie rock...might as well drown me now and put me out of my misery." The wail of an electric guitar filled the air. "Hey, Metallica!"

He began drumming on the dash, rockin' out like punk teenager. "Dapow, dapow, dapow! Da-pa-ow-OW!"

Juli had to laugh and once again Rio glanced in the rearview mirror, this time grinning at her. "I have no idea what you see in this fool."

"He's fun."

"Better than funny lookin'," Cord goaded, pausing from his noisemaking to stick his tongue out at Rio and shoot her a wink, "old man!"

"I take it back, *joven*," Rio said, still smiling. "You're not a badass. You're a certifiable dumbass."

"*Sí, sí, señor*," Cord shot back, sticking his tongue out between words. "A dumbass who's gonna whip your sorry ass if you don't get a move on. I have things to do, people to see."

Juli cracked up. A fool Cord was and God she loved him for it. Tempted by some imp she couldn't contain, she joined in, pointing her tongue at Rio and wagging it in

time to the music. When the song wound down, she said, "Cord's right. Drive faster. At this rate, the sun will set before we get off the plantation."

"I'm still trying to decide if I want to be seen in public with you two."

"Very funny."

"Ah! Jefferson Airplane—now we're talkin'." And Cord was off, mouthing the lyrics while Rio kept puttering along. Juli relaxed. All was right in her world.

Calm as she'd been since this nutzoid, mixed-up adventure began the night of the award ceremony, Juli leaned back in her seat and listened to the band sing about Alice and chasing rabbits and falling... That's what she was doing, wasn't it? Falling for two—

Rio snapped his fingers. "That reminds me—what's Bunny Tracks?"

The song *would* have to be "White Rabbit". Crap. And she'd just gotten all comfortable too. Her gaze collided with Rio's in the mirror. "Truce, right?" She reminded them both before embarrassing herself. "I can confess my foibles without having either of you rub it in?"

"Of course," Rio said glibly, and she didn't believe him at all.

Cord straightened. "Foibles? Do tell, darlin'."

With a sigh, Juli bared her secret indulgence. "It's ice cream. My favorite flavor. Vanilla with chocolate syrup and little peanut butter-filled chocolate bunnies."

Silence.

And the band singing about mushrooms. Eating them, smoking them...she wasn't sure. Could one even smoke mushrooms?

Ah, no matter, because that was all she heard, just the song. She could breathe easy once again.

Then a snicker reached her ears.

But Rio's eyes were focused dead ahead. His face impassive.

Another snicker. Cord turned in his seat to laugh at her. "Little chocolate bunnies? What is it, Easter?"

She pushed his shoulder. "I was celebrating, you moron."

Rio finally broke, grinning widely. "But *six* cartons?"

"It was on sale!" she defended herself. "And can't you go any faster? Please?"

"Aw, what the hell. Your wish, milady..." The tires spun out as Rio gave up and jammed on the gas. "Is my command."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Twelve hundred. Not a penny less."

Cord glanced at Rio and Juli walking across Main Street to the drugstore and his fingers danced over a rust spot, considering. He could buff it out, get this baby painted a brilliant cherry red. "It runs?"

"Purrs like a kitten," Chuck told him, hooking his fingers in his pants' pockets, just under his beer belly.

Bullshit.

The slimy, bald bastard had sold cars in this town for three decades. They were all pieces of shit. But this...this was a beautiful piece of shit.

Tossing his cigar boxes of cash on the passenger seat, Cord pulled on the door handle of the 1961 Imperial LeBaron hardtop coupe, prepared to make a deal despite the car's condition.

The big door opened with a screech. Music to his ears and nothin' a little oil wouldn't fix. The aged seat welcomed him like a lover's caress when he slid in, sun-heated leather warming his back. The car was a classic. Rusted, dented, but a classic. And just like the one his ma had owned before she died.

He ought to buy a truck—how the hell he'd ever get supplies back to Willow Creek was beyond him. Suppose he'd just have to pester Rio into it—hauling glass for the broken windows, fresh wood for the rotting roof. Way Cord saw it, at this juncture *any* repair was better than no repair, but he liked this car too much to pass her up.

He could just imagine Juli's hair whipping in the wind as he whisked her off on their honeymoon. To Disneyland.

Now that was wistful, just like buying this car. But hell. A guy could dream, couldn't he?

"Give me the keys," Cord told Chuck. "I want to take her for a spin."

"Got to run inside and fetch them. You got your license handy?"

Cord ran his hand over the steering wheel. "Don't give me that, Chuck. You know where I live."

"Yeah, yeah." Chuck lit up a smoke, waddling inside. After forever and a second he returned with the keys and Cord started the engine. Well, whaddya know, it did purr.

Like a damn lion.

"I'll be back in an hour!"

"Hey!" Chuck hollered when Cord shifted into drive and pulled off in the opposite direction of the hardware store, ignoring the man's protests. If he was going to buy this car, he wanted more than just an around-the-block test drive.

He had one piece of business he needed to take care of, one that he didn't want Rio and Juli to know about. It was a little too personal.

Cord had decided to pay a visit to see the town doctor. There was the matter of his grandfather, how he'd died, where he was buried, but more than that, he knew Juli and Rio were right. He needed someone to talk to, and ole Doc Jones—Emerson P. Jones, the sawbones who'd set Cord's arm, sewn stitches in his noggin and cured a hundred



childhood sniffles with nothing more than prescribing chicken soup for his body and hard candy to soothe his throat—he was the only person Cord trusted to listen to him without trying to shove pills down his gullet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later, with errands complete, Rio and Juliana sat on a bench, treating themselves to ice cream.

Rio surveyed the mound of bags surrounding them. When the woman had said she needed some things, she hadn't been joking. Even with all he'd bought her previously, Juliana had three bags alone stuffed full of "necessary toiletries". The two boxes of condoms, he could understand, but the woman had enough damn scrunchies to make a rope and swing to the moon. Interesting, how she'd purchased so many after professing to hate the brightly colored hairbands. He also noticed how she put back the can of mousse after deliberating over it for a full minute. Progress, he hoped.

"That boyfriend of yours seems to have disappeared," Rio commented, taking a lick of his butter pecan. The sooner loverboy showed up, the sooner they could get their packages loaded and return to the plantation. Rio wouldn't feel completely safe until he had Juliana back on the property and away from prying eyes.

"Well, then no ice cream for him." She leaned over, stealing a taste from his lips with a flick of her tongue. The brim of her cap knocked into his forehead but Rio didn't care. If it wasn't for protecting her identity, he'd toss his precious 'Skins cap to the ground and be done with it. She zipped her tongue along the seam between his lips. "Mmmm. Pretty good."

A zing of awareness raced through Rio's body and he flung his arm around her, keeping her close. "Damn, sweetheart, that felt good. Do it again."

Holding her gaze through those blasted sunglasses, Rio brought his cone to his lips, opened wide and snaked his tongue around the scoop of butter pecan. She actually blushed, doing the same with her chocolate then brought her lips to his. Their tongues invaded each other's mouths, stroked, stroked deep, stroked once again, cold flesh quickly warming then she pulled away, smacked his lips in a fast kiss and returned to seriously devouring her cone.

If he could, he'd strip all his clothes off and rub butter pecan up and down his naked body. Let her lick that.

Instead, her tongue darted out, swiping the side of her chocolate cone. "No one wasted a second glance on me, so that's good."

"Yep." Rio snapped the right strap of her overalls, swirling his tongue around the inside of his mouth, tasting her all over again. "I had fun with you today."

All she needed was a fishing pole and her transformation into one of the locals would be complete.

What had Cord – what had *he* – done to her? Sure, what she wore now was just a costume, but Juliana herself had changed. Inside and out. And when he wasn't busy being jealous, Rio kinda liked the new her. Who was he fooling? He loved the new her. The new accessible, *approachable*, Juliana.

Hell, he even liked the new her with Cord – insane as that was. They were good together, in bed and out. Watching the way they interacted was teaching him a thing or two about fun and playfulness, whatever sense that made. Looking back with that 20/20 hindsight that's always blurry when you *really* need it, Rio realized when the plane went down, his sense of humor had gone up in flames right along with it.

Juliana took another lick of her ice cream, arched up and kissed him again. The chocolate melted in their mouths, sweet and smooth. Then she moaned, pressed her breasts against his arm, and every nerve in Rio's body responded.

He dropped his cone to the ground, ignoring the loud splat, and took her by the back of the head, deepening the kiss. Tasting much more than the ice cream. Tasting his future – he hoped – with every swipe of her tongue.

"Ah, *ángelita*." He pulled up for air, brushed some stray hairs back under her cap then returned for more. How he wanted her. Wanted what he'd never had – to slip his cock inside her luscious body and ride. Here and now.

"Mmm." She broke away with a shy smile and – he imagined – a twinkle in her eyes. "You dropped your butter pecan."

Good God almighty, how the hell was a man supposed to know his place when she went and did things like that? She'd kissed his brains to mush, right on a public street bench without any concern over the fact she was with another man, that Cord could come along at any moment and catch them. Didn't she care? Didn't Cord?

Well, Rio sure as hell did.

His throat tightened and he swallowed down his earlier euphoria. They needed to talk. "Juliana –"

"Since you enjoyed yourself today," she interrupted, brushing aside whatever he was going to say, "does that mean when we get back to DC you won't be disappearing again?"

*If* he let her go back to DC...

But then the true concern in her voice reached him. God. He'd really done a number on her, hadn't he?

"You're not getting rid of me, Juliana," he told her sincerely. "Never again. I promise."

She let out the breath she'd apparently been holding and held up her cone, offering him a lick. "Great. That means I can drag you along shopping anytime."

"Hmm. Long as you're trying on bikinis." More ice cream kisses? Or talk that would surely destroy the mood? He took that lick she'd presented. Lord help him, he was losing his common sense in this nonsensical situation.

"Or panties?"

There. That did it. Now not only had they publicly kissed but his cock was hard. A flagpole in his damn jeans. Waving in the wind for all to see and salute. Goddammit.

And of course, Cord chose just that moment to come speeding down Main, honking the horn of a rusted old Chrysler convertible—'61 Imperial LeBaron if Rio wasn't mistaken—the engine popping and sputtering.

Holy —

But before Rio could finish the thought, Cord veered to the side of the road and the whole vehicle just shut down. Died.

"Like it?" Cord hopped out without opening the door, patting the hood as he came around to greet them with a jaunty wave. Rio had never seen anyone look so happy, especially after having a car crap out from under them. "I just bought it."

Rio rose to his feet, flagpole cock and all. Looking at that car wasn't helping either—his fascination with classic cars rising to the forefront...and he'd always had a hard-on especially for convertibles. Had even dog-eared a secret stash in his savings for the express purpose of buying his own when the time was right.

Grabbing one of Juliana's bags, he held it in front of his crotch and walked over to the vintage car. *Down, boy. Down,* Rio mentally commanded his cock as he checked out Cord's new ride.

Figures the kid would get one before him—the way Juliana was staring wide-eyed at the older car, she liked it. A lot.

"Beautiful," Rio agreed. "But I think it just croaked." He ran his hand along the metal side. He'd always loved the older Imperial LeBarons.

"Yeah, that does present a problem." Cord brushed off the dead car as though it were nothing. "So what do you think, Jules?"

She flashed one of those supermodel smiles as she headed over to the car. "A little rough around the edges but definitely hot!" She winked. "It suits you, Cordell."

Well then, it sounded as if the car suited all of them. And Rio wanted a ride in it.

"Here!" Cord pulled a paper sack from the seat and tossed it to Juliana. "I bought you a little present, darlin'."

"A present? Cool. Thanks!"

Damn. The kid gets a new car *and* thinks to get Juliana a present, and what does Rio get? An unappreciated erection and melted ice cream. And not even Bunny Tracks at that.

Damn.

*Ah*, his lips and tongue reminded him, *but you did get chocolate and butter pecan kisses.* There was that. Okay. So he'd take back the last *damn*. But not the first one. Rio was still ticked Cord stole his car—even if only in his mind. And his girl—ditto.

His cock finally calmed to normal, Rio tossed the bag in the backseat. "Pop the hood, junior. Let me take a look."

"You got it." There was a creaking sound as Cord released the latch. "I think it's just the battery. It'll be an easy fix until I have time to do more."

"You hope." Rio peered inside. "Man, this old jalopy needs some work."

"Yeah, but she'll be a beaut once I get my hands in her."

"Hey...what about me? I don't want your hands in anyone but me!" Juli called out, but neither man noticed. "Whoo hoo! Getting jealous over here."

"Have you thought of racing her?"

"Nah, just gonna use her for basic transportation."

"Basic, my ass. Hoses are dry-rotted. We'll have to get the parts and get those changed out."

"Yeah and see here—the battery doesn't look too old either, which means the alternator is iffy..."

And just like that, Juli once again found herself the third wheel, sitting on the curb while the men went back and forth about the car, having completely forgotten she existed.

Ah well, if they persisted in ignoring her, then she'd just sit here and eat all of Cord's Red Hots—they'd been in the sack, along with her shirt.

The shirt that Rio would see, hastily pulled on over the overalls, *if* he ever bothered to look her way.

Her present from Cord—a spiffy new Carolina Panthers t-shirt. XXL. To wear in bed, she bet.

Or to drop on the floor beside it—surely his true intent, she gathered from the tube of Creamy Glide Personal Lubricant and gargantuan box of condoms also in the bag.

Hmm. A tube of lube. Now what all might he be planning with that?

Juli popped another Red Hot into her mouth, smiling. Sometimes being ignored had its advantages.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*Madre preciosa.*

Their *chingada* mothers.

Men always ran to Mommy Dearest when they were in trouble and Johnson Mitchell was no different. Playing soccer out behind a suburban home in New Jersey with a bunch of brat kids. As if he hadn't a damn care in the world. As if he were safe.

He wasn't.

No one hid from Tito. No one who betrayed him lived. Readjusting the boutonniere on his lapel, Tito consulted his diamond-encrusted Rolex—he'd treated himself to a new one when Oz died. 11:37 a.m. The grass should be dry by now. And if it wasn't, he could always tell Rosa to fix any damage.

He turned off the engine and slid a pink ski mask over his face—he liked the irony of owning one that matched his flowers. Plenty of witnesses, but with his face hidden, none who would hold up in court. Not against his bulldog lawyer. *Not* that he'd be arrested for a damn thing, ever. Mitchell wasn't his only financed friend on the force.

But he sure was the luckiest one, receiving a reprieve as he had, given Diablo's unexpected trip to the ER to get his shithole reamed. God, the stench that ensued had made Tito feel dirty for a week. He should just staple his brother's damn mouth shut, feed the bastard through a straw and be done with it because it had taken days longer than it should have to track down Mitchell.

But he was here now, Tito reminded himself, eager to get started. And finished. He stepped from his Mercedes onto the sidewalk, wearing his newest pair of Belvedere lace-ups—Rosa had polished the cocoa brown eel and stingray until it shone when he'd informed her this morning that he was celebrating. She thought he'd been happy about his brother's release from the hospital. He chose to keep her ignorant of the true reason.

His feet danced across the concrete and into the yard faster than the children's laughter filtered through the air. The dirty little brats would be pissing their beds for months to come—but they were lucky. He was being generous today, wearing the mask—which was destroying his hair and irked him to no end—rather than slaughter them all. Why waste the bullets?

Generous. Mitchell's family didn't deserve it. See what a nice guy he was?

As his shoes sank into the pristine grass covering Mitchell's mommy's backyard, their eyes met.

Mitchell winced, wet his lips, probably his pants. "Tito, hey. Look, man...let's go somewhere and talk."

Mitchell glanced around in a panic — proving his guilt — searching for an escape. But he'd find none. Tito wouldn't give him the opportunity.

Mitchell gulped. He knew the writing was on the wall, or the nails in his coffin as it were. *He knew.* "Not in front of the kids, please. *Please, man.*"

"A dirty cop, a dirty criminal. Let this be a message to the dirtballs you associate with. There's honor in loyalty." Tito lifted his arm and fired off two bullets that went straight into the traitor's head. "You have none."

Mitchell's body jerked and fell back. The kids went screaming in all directions. Tito calmly walked forward, liberated the carnation from his lapel and dropped it on Mitchell's chest.

Smiling, he returned to his Mercedes, buffed a single splatter of blood off the toe box of his left shoe and drove off.

The reporter would be next. Just after he fixed his hair.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Juli basked in her surroundings...the wisp of a slight breeze on her skin, the song of a nearby bird, the vibrant colors of the changing trees in the distance. She looked down at the hard male body beneath hers and soaked in Cord.

Slowly, leisurely, she and Cord were making love atop a blanket spread over stubby grass behind the plantation house. Her body was alive, her senses on fire.

Legs straddling his waist, Juli braced her hands on Cord's chest and welcomed his cock deep inside her. She took him to the hilt, deliberately putting on a show, well aware that Rio could see them, that he was watching, just as she'd caught him several times the past few days.

Even on camera with a microphone in hand and all eyes on her, Juli had never experienced such a thrill. Never felt as if she were so completely the center of attention. Never felt so loved.

Riding Cord faster, harder, she cried out. She never wanted her time at Willow Creek to end, *this* to end. She loved being with Cord and Rio, didn't miss her old life in the least, which should have concerned her, but didn't. Which just went to show how much she'd changed.

Cord's calloused hands brushed over the tingling skin of her back and bottom, making her shudder. Leaning forward, she buried her face in the hollow between his neck and shoulder and welcomed his exploration. He traced along her crack, gathering cream from her folds then found her anus. With a slick finger, he pressed inside the tight hole, driving her wild.

What was Rio thinking? Was he wishing it was his cock diving into her ass rather than Cord's finger? Would he ever stop being an onlooker and join them?

She'd never be satisfied until he did. She arched back at the thought, moaning in ecstasy.

Cord bit at her neck, sending prickles of pleasure-pain through her. She lowered her head and nipped back, teasing the lobe of his ear.

"I need him," she whispered, her heart, her body aching.

Cord understood as she'd never believed any man in the history of the universe could understand any woman. He understood without judging. His love was true. Honest and raw. He didn't act jealous or needy...simply said he just wanted to be with her. Wanted her to be happy.

"I know." He hugged her tight against him. "Invite him."

Emotion clogged her throat. She had, more than once, and Rio always refused. Juli couldn't handle another rejection. But why did he keep watching? It made her yearn... "I can't. Not again."

"Do you want me to give you more?" Another finger pressed at her anus. "Close your eyes. Imagine he's here."

Juli obeyed, pretending it was Rio mounting her from behind, plunging slowly into her as Cord filled her ass with his fingers. She squeezed her pussy around his shaft, holding him deep within her as she fucked him harder.

"Oh God, Cord," she moaned. "Rio..."

Every muscle constricted, every nerve ending shuddered as an orgasm took hold of her. She screamed, feeling as if she were outside her body and looking down at herself, watching as Rio was watching. Seeing a woman possessed by unfed desire.

She was writhing, out of control, convulsing around Cord. Her pleasure was a tornado, she was whirling with ecstasy and emotion yet confused, conflicted.

Another scream and she collapsed, falling atop Cord. He jerked within her, groaning as he came inside the condom. Slipping his fingers free, he held her, comforting her. One hand secured her flush against him, the other stroked her hair. His scent enveloped her – fresh-cut wood. Primitive. Pure Cord.

She buried herself in his embrace. "Thank you," she murmured. He was giving her what Rio refused to, giving of himself so she could be happy. "Thank you so much. For everything."

"I love you, Jules, you know that." He'd begun voicing his feelings several days ago.

Her heart swelled, hearing it again. For the first time since she'd become an adult, Juli felt secure. Secure in his love. Confident he wouldn't abandon her. She felt free to return the emotion, which she did. "I love you too."

She lifted her head, placing her hands to his whiskered jaw. She cupped his face and kissed him hard on the lips. "Don't ever doubt that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sitting under the giant oak that shaded the front yard, Juli watched and waited for Rio's return. An unseasonable fly buzzed in front of her face and she swatted at it, wiping sweat from her brow. An Indian summer had set in, leaving the weather unusually warm.

Rio had left some time ago to call Tom and check in. It had been over a week since their last conversation and Rio was anxious, the same as she.

Anxious? More like petrified.

She never should have surprised Rio by offering to testify when she spoke with Tom. Admitting she had evidence. She should have followed Rio's advice – disappeared, started a new life.



But hearing that Walt had been killed, she just couldn't stand the thought of letting the bad guys get away with it, not when she'd worked so hard, risked so much to stop ruthless scum like that. Walt had family, family who deserved justice, as did so many others.

For all accounts and purposes, Juli Reed was still missing. Going on two weeks now... Had it really been such a short time? For some reason, spending hour upon hour in either Cord or Rio's company—often both of them—made time both stand still and speed by. It was remarkable really, but on many levels, she felt as though she knew them, and they her, more than any three people could.

The "official" word on the street was that she'd been kidnapped by the Benitos, though according to Tom they weren't taking credit for it. Tom had told Rio that he let his boss know Juli was safe without disclosing her location and that the department was choosing to keep up the appearance of a missing persons investigation, if a cursory one, to lend credence to the story.

What her boss at WBFJ must be thinking, Juli didn't have a clue and was perplexed to realize how little concern she had for her own future with the station. By the time Barbara exchanged her ruined desk blotter for a clean one, she'd likely fired Juli in her mind.

Mere weeks ago nothing mattered to Juli as much as her latest report, righting the wrongs of the powerful, avenging the little guy and telling it all to the masses. That's all she'd lived for.

It was hard to let go of that side of her personality, but now, away from all the technologically advanced distractions that had become commonplace—from her wireless laptop to something as basic as a telephone—Juli had been forced to reevaluate life in general and what she really wanted to do with hers.

For once, she was second-guessing her decision to do the right thing. Somehow it just didn't seem so all-fired important anymore. Of course nailing crooks was necessary...but why did *she* have to make herself solely responsible?

Because, plain and simple, she was the one with the information. The one who could make a difference, as well as the one being hunted, the one with a price on her head.

The next death, if it came to that.

Juli heard the distant rumble of rocks being smashed under tires in the peaceful air, just as a cloud of dust formed over the trees. She watched Rio's black SUV cruising up the lane and couldn't deny the relief that swept over her. She came to her feet when he parked, bracing herself for news.

When he abruptly swung his long legs from the vehicle and slammed the door with far more force than needed, the urge to run and greet him disintegrated. Instead, apprehension replaced the excitement she'd felt anticipating his return the moment he yanked off his Redskins cap, revealing an intimidating scowl that was directed straight at her.

A predatory cougar, he stalked forward, heading toward the oak. His intent gaze pinned her in place and she instinctively backed until she hit the trunk. Taking comfort in the security, the solidness of it.

"Give me whatever evidence you have. *Now.*"

*Here they go again.*

"No." Juli crossed her arms in a defiant show of bravado. "Without a witness, the court will toss it out."

Coming to stand before her, Rio shoved his hands in the front pocket of his jeans. The look on his face told her it was that or wring her neck. Or spank her bottom. Hmmm. "Juliana, this isn't your fight."

"What?" This conversation *again*?

What would it feel like if he spanked her? And since when did she develop ADD?

Ah well, it wasn't as if he were saying anything she cared to pay attention to. Nope, she'd better things to think about, like how she loved it when he turned all dark and brooding, all dominating with her, but that didn't mean she had any intention of obeying him. Juli Reed stopped being docile when she'd graduated from her first training bra. Mmm. And now her breasts were tingling at the thought of Rio's mouth sucking them again.

"Juliana! Pay attention. I said this isn't your fight."

"I can't just turn my back on what's right." *No matter how much I might want to.* With an exasperated sigh—why did she let his presence get to her?—she asked, "I take it the department hasn't made the bust yet?"

"Tito killed a cop named Mitchell. Gunned him down in broad daylight, in front of a bunch of kids. You know anything about that?"

"*What?*" Her stomach dropped to her toes.

The back door banged in the distance.

"Mitchell has something to with the evidence, doesn't he?"

Juli couldn't bring herself to answer. Rio's eyes narrowed further. "He was in hiding too, Juliana, but the Benitos found him."

"Was Tito arrested?"

"Of course not." Rio shook his head, disgust twisting his mouth. "It's amazing what money can buy."

When would it end?

Cord came walking around the house, carrying his fishing pole. "What can money buy?"

"The—"

"Nothing," Juli interrupted Rio quickly. She couldn't discuss this right now. She needed time to think—without Cord starting in on her as well. She forced her wide, film-at-eleven smile. "Going fishing?"

Hand on his hip, Cord rested the pole on the ground. One eyebrow arched and his gaze darted from her to Rio then back again, no doubt wondering what she was hiding. They both knew he'd get it out of her eventually. But not right now. "Thought you two might want to come. Maybe take a dip in the creek. Lord knows it's hot enough."

She glanced at Rio, sending him a message with her eyes. *Come with us*, she pleaded silently, *let it go and relax*.

Rio cleared his throat and she knew he wouldn't drop it indefinitely. But for now... "Please?"

He nodded, clapping his hands together. "Sounds great. But if I don't catch it, I don't have to clean it so I'll stick with watching."

*Watching.*

Juli wondered if he'd intended for the comment to hold so much meaning, or if it was just an errant slip of the tongue.

*Tongue.*

If she didn't do something about their current situation, she'd—well, crap. Juli didn't know what she would do, but over the past few days, she'd come to learn that there *was* something worse than her hair without styling products—wanting and wanting and wanting.

And never completely having.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, you over it?" Cord jerked his fishing pole in the air, teasing the fish.

"Over it?" Sitting on the tree-shaded bank, Rio unlaced his boots, needing to connect with the earth. Juliana had disappeared as soon as they'd arrived, gone to find a sunny spot to lie out, she'd said, and they hadn't seen or heard a word from her since.

Cord glanced at him then returned his gaze to the water. "Over being pissed at me."

"Who says I'm pissed?" *Watching you and my girl get each other off time and time again...*

"No sense in being mad. You can't help the fact you're a *pendejo*," Rio added lightly, tugging off his boots then peeling away his socks and stuffing them inside. "Juliana's a big girl. I'm realizing she needs to make her own decisions. If she wants to be with you, I won't stop her."

He swept a couple of rocks out of the way and placed his bare feet against the ground. Comfortable silence reigned between them. A few deep calming breaths later, he heard Cord's chuckle.

"*Pendejo*? You calling me an asshole?"

"No. I'm calling you a jackass."

"Okay then. You're lucky, old man. I'm going let that one slide." Rio watched as Cord slowly began reeling in his line, not feeling the need to respond. They'd talked, really talked a few times the past week and it never ceased to surprise him that he didn't feel more awkward around Cord, knowing, blatantly *seeing* what he and Juliana did together. Over and over again.

"Hey, man, listen," Cord said a moment later into the stillness. "I'm sorry I blew your cover that first night during dinner. I know that's what started all this."

"Who knows—I might've done the same."

Cord wound the reel, arched back and cast his line out again, farther this time. Rio heard the little plop the sinker made when it landed against the gently eddying surface.

Basking in the peace of the moment, of the place, Rio settled back against the bank, closed his eyes and allowed his mind to go blank.

No worries over what was going on at the office or deals he was hoping to close. No concern over all the things he'd left undone back home in exchange for stealing a few magical days in the back of beyond. No thought as to how cursory his daily routine had become, how meeting up with Juliana had breathed such life back into his existence...

But there was no damn ignoring how her life hung in the balance if she persisted in outing the Benito gang by turning over whatever evidence she had. Making herself even more of a target.

His peace shot to hell, Rio sat up, swearing fiercely in Spanish.

"Whoa." Cord jumped. "Not your usual reaction when you lie down like that." He started winding the reel and pulling the clear fishing line through the shimmering water toward the bank. "Why do you do that? Take off your shoes and socks and then relax? I've seen you walking around barefoot out back a time or two."

Rio curled his toes into the moist dirt and placed his palms flat on the ground. "My grandmother was half Native American and she always spoke with such reverence about Mother Earth. Her healing energies are incredible."

"Your grandmother's or the Earth's?"

"Are you intentionally being an ass?" Rio asked without thinking then glanced at Cord and intercepted the sincerity in the other man's gaze.

"No. I really want to know. You seem..." Cord finished winding his line and shrugged, looking out over the flowing river.

Rio watched, curious, as Cord appeared to be mustering courage for something. Finally, Cord turned and faced him. "I've never asked Juli how you got scarred. I figured it wasn't any of my damn business and if I was meant to know, you'd tell me." He fidgeted with the reel. "Hell. I guess what I'm trying to say is I respect your privacy, but anyone with eyes can see you've been through hell and I know you're not *that* much older than me—"

Rio fought a laugh at the way Cord grudgingly said that last part.

"But you seem so *whole*."

He did sputter out loud at that.

Cord backtracked. "Fuck. This isn't coming out right. I know your life isn't perfect an' things with Juli are such a mess, I don't even want to go there, but you have—I don't know, a presence around you, like you're strong and won't shatter no matter what life throws at you. I envy that, Rio Tarin. I really do."

As if he'd said too much, Cord started readying his pole to cast again. Rio stopped him with a hand to his shoulder. "Juliana hasn't been so circumspect where your privacy is concerned. Don't blame her, but she told me more of your history. I know I said it before, but she really thinks you need to see a counselor, get on some medication or—"

"I won't," Cord said bitterly then looked back at Rio. "It was drugs that did my ma in. Pain pills at first, after a freak elevator accident ruined her back. But when those stopped working, she got hooked on the hard stuff. Turned into a junkie before I was eight. She OD'd the summer I turned ten and I came to live here. So no meds. None. I'll get by without or I won't get by at all."

Cord's words and demeanor had an edge to them Rio hadn't seen since the morning they'd met when Cord mistakenly thought Rio had raped Juliana. As if shrugging off the past, Cord lifted and dropped his shoulders, causing Rio's hand to fall away then he focused on rolling in his line and recasting. "Anyway, I saw my family doc when we were in town. So don't worry about me."

Rio wanted to ask more, about Cord's dad, about his childhood, about the doctor, but figured it was best to let it slide. Cord was seeking help in his own way. That was the important part.

Rio nodded toward the thicket of trees beyond the bank, returning to Cord's earlier question. "Mother Earth in all her splendor, from ocean to mountain, desert to forest...she's a healer. Put your bare feet on her sometime, draw in her soothing energies. Sounds weird, but it works and no prescription is needed."

"I might just do that. Thanks." Cord ducked and wiped the side of his face with his sleeve. "Well, the fish sure aren't biting." He set aside his fishing pole and began kicking off his shoes. "Thought for sure they'd be plentiful on a day like this."

"Surprised they're not." Rio scooted forward and plunged his feet in the cold water of the creek. "For fall, it sure is a hot one."

"Sure is," Cord agreed, and Rio thought the heat had more to do with two men discussing uncomfortable subjects than with the late-morning temperature. "Think I'll go for a swim. You game?"

Rio raised a brow. "You have swim trunks stashed in your tackle box?"

"Thinkin' we don't need any." Cord gestured across the bank.

*Shit.*

Juliana had reappeared, naked as the day she was born, arms and legs outstretched on the opposite bank, her every curve laid out before them, her intimate crevices exposed. The sun beat down on her, making her glow under its bright rays.

She knew damn good and well what she was doing. And Rio knew she was turned-on by it. Her nipples were hard and pointing straight to the heavens. She'd parted her legs and though she was too far away to see for certain, he was positive her slit would be swollen, glistening with her cream.

Dammit. She was asking for it—as blatantly as if she'd come up to both of them and stripped, holding rubbers in each hand. The problem was, Rio wasn't certain whether it was him or Cord she was asking for.

But apparently it didn't matter, not anymore, he thought ruefully, feeling his cock lengthen and push against his jeans, and it took all his willpower not to jump into the creek and swim to her. To take her.

*Madre de Dios.* Why the hell was she doing this to him? For days it had gone on, Juliana strutting around nude, making love with Cord right in front of him—intentionally turning him on, drawing him close then shoving him away. He didn't get it. Why was she always kissing on *him*, intentionally making him want her then cozying up to and traipsing off with Cord? Sleeping in that bastard's bed?

A whoop blasted through the air and a butt-naked Cord went swinging past him like a *loco* jungle man. *Splash!* Cord cannonballed in the deepest part of the creek. Juliana shot up, laughing.

"You're crazy!" she shouted, echoing his thought. Leaping to her feet, she waded into the water. Her breasts and hips jostled with every uneven step, condemning him to several uninterrupted seconds of pure torture.

"Hey, you started it." Cord rushed forward, grabbed her by the waist and dunked her. She came up gasping and ready for a fight.

Seeing them fool around without a care in the world only served to make Rio's cock grow harder. Juliana and Cord splashed each other, they played and wrestled. Tormenting him. And all he could do was sit there and watch, feeling his feet freeze in the icy creek and wishing it was his heart going numb instead.

Once in the center, Cord lowered himself into the water and Juliana clambered onto his back and swung her feet over his shoulders. Then she wrapped her legs across his chest and Rio knew with one hundred percent certainty that her bare pussy was brushing against the overlong hair on Cord's neck. Cord held her shins, stumbling through the water and Rio felt as if he were drowning.

"Good Lord, woman, what'd you eat for breakfast?" Cord teased, which was a real joke, given that it had been Rio's turn to cook that morning and the three of them had eaten cereal topped with fresh berries. Berries they'd all picked yesterday. Together.

"Hah now! Giddy up, cowboy!" Juliana cried, and witnessing how easily they both got into the spirit only served to agitate Rio some more. They were frolicking as if they were goddamn children.

Part of him was scandalized, seeing how they put on such a blatant show. Mostly, he was jealous. So jealous it was amazing he hadn't turned green and blended in with his surroundings. Maybe he had. Maybe that was why they could do all those intimate things that cursed him to suffer like a sinner in hell.

Rio couldn't fathom ever feeling so free or comfortable in his own skin to behave as they were. Couldn't shake the shame that seemed to dog his every step no matter that Cord thought he handled himself well.

Speaking of handling himself...

Rio jammed both hands into the earth. Rocks and debris gouged into his palms and still he forced his hands deeper. Praying for escape, for release, for a different outcome than what he secretly feared—that Juliana had found her true mate in Cord while Rio had been pussyting around, too damn chicken to face her.

"Come on, Rio! Get in!"

She waved to him and he shook his head. "No thanks."

The two of them approached the bank, still laughing and kidding around. Embarrassing the shit out of him. For God's sake, they were both *naked* and touching each other not six feet from him. Had they no shame?

"Come on, Rio." Juliana splashed water in his direction, soaking his shirt. "Have a little fun."

He kicked water back at her. "Don't feel like swimming."

"Oh, come on!" she pleaded, splashing him again.

His anger rose in direct proportion to the number of wet splotches that appeared on his clothing. Across his face.

"Why not?" Splash. Splash. "Don't you want to join us?"

*Splash!*

Now soaked and past pissed, resentment rising in him so furiously he gripped handfuls of the small rocks and flung them over their joint heads, he shouted, "Enough!"

"Whoa, man," Cord called out, his surprise obvious.

"Rio!" Splash. Juliana wouldn't let up. "Why not?"

Unwilling to trust himself if he stayed, Rio stood and backed away. It was probably too late, but he shoved his hands in his pockets, trying to fluff his pants up enough to hide his erection. If he'd ever doubted that his equipment still worked, days in *their* company had put that fear to bed.

*Bed?*

"Shit," he muttered then louder, "I don't have any trunks."

Juliana slid off Cord's back and swam the few short strokes to the bank. She rested her arms against the muddied ground, staring up at him with those knockout baby blues. "You don't need any."

Blood rushed to his face. "Trust me, I do."

Juliana's voice lowered, became softer. "Rio, we don't care about your scars."

"I do." Not to mention his eye-gouging hard-on. He certainly wasn't about to display how turned-on he got watching the two of them. Again.

"Man. Don't sweat it. We'll look away." Cord had floated back out to the middle where he sank down in the water, treading to stay afloat. He turned to face the opposite bank and added over his shoulder, "Just get in. Cool off."

"Rio." Juliana tilted her head to the side, studying his face as her arms stretched toward him on the bank. "You're the most gorgeous man I've ever known," she told him. "The scars add to that. They make you look...dangerous."

"They make me look like a man who failed." Rio scowled, unable to hold her gaze and dropping his. "You."

"We've been over that. Please, just get undressed and jump in."

"No."

"Fine," she snapped, tossing one last splash his direction. "Fine! Just forget it then."

Turning, Rio grabbed his boots and stalked off. He couldn't take watching them, being around them a second longer. Couldn't take the agony. He was tired of being the odd man out, the not-so-secret voyeur getting off watching both of them get it on.

He was sick of seeing his woman love on another man. But more than anything, he'd had it with feeling bad – about himself, about the mistakes he'd made, about life in general.

Rio stepped on a sharp twig and swore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Juli was so wet, so horny. So primed to fuck – both the men in her life.

But Rio was too busy feeling sorry for himself and being angry at her.

Battling down emotion, she swam into Cord's arms. Nuzzling his neck, she kissed at his skin. "Is he still watching?"

"No." Cord pulled back, searching her eyes. "Juliana..."

He said Rio's name for her. Intentionally? She raised her brows, wondering if this was the end. Had Cord decided he'd finally had enough? Had Rio said something to him? She licked the creek's moisture from her lips and waited.

"Go to him," Cord told her on a harsh exhalation then released his hold on her. "Go to Rio. He's hurting and only you can heal him."

Go to him? Just like that?

How could she?



She wasn't even positive he wanted her anymore. He'd respond, but only after she flung herself at him. And he never followed through. Juli bit her lower lip. "I'm not sure I can, not again."

"I am." Cord brushed his knuckles over her bare breasts then yanked his hand back "Go on now. He needs you."

Still she hesitated, uncertain. Wanting to yet not wanting to hurt Cord. Not wanting to be rejected by Rio.

"There's a condom in the pocket of my jeans. I'm telling you to go to him, Juli." Cord pushed her away from him and water splashed up over her shoulders and neck. Against her sun-warmed skin, the cool spray felt refreshing, almost like a new beginning.

Though Cord's eyes looked troubled, he nodded resolutely and spoke firmly, the teasing note she always associated with him gone. "Just go to him, darlin'. Truth is, I can't bear to see him hurting either. Being with you will fix that. Please. *Go!*"

Juli smiled without her typical confidence and glanced out at the empty trees where Rio had disappeared. She turned back to Cord and somehow the look of pride that filled his expression gave her the strength she needed. "Thank you."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Over the noise of his escape, Rio heard a branch snap and the crinkle of dry leaves crunching under more than his own two feet.

*Shit.* His entire body tensed, but he kept half walking, half racing on bare feet through the trees. Which one of them had roused themselves from their water-play to come after him? And *why*?

"Rio, wait!" Juliana called out. "Please!"

He slowed. What was she up to now? Dropping his boots, Rio turned around, bracing his arm on a large oak. He needed the support.

Then he looked in her direction. Jesus. Juliana was still naked, wearing sandals and nothing else. God, what a pair they made.

Through the woods, she dashed up the hill toward him, dodging the various pine and assorted trees, climbing over dense underbrush. Her breasts jiggled with every step, swinging in the air. Like a woodland nymph, she'd come to seduce him, had she?

"Foolish woman," he muttered under his breath, unable to tear his gaze away from the tempting sight.

Hot arousal slammed through his body, his cock swelling to the brink of explosion, straining against his jeans. As if he hadn't already been fighting this condition. Damn her!

She reached the clearing shaded by the tall tree he rested against, gasping for air, causing those mouthwatering breasts to move some more. Six feet away she stopped and tried to catch her breath. "R-Rio."

He gripped the bark beneath his fingertips to keep from touching her. "That's my name," he said sarcastically, "all day long."

Like a criminal facing a firing squad, Juliana stood there, boldly staring at him, as if awaiting his order to "Fire!"

But this was no guilt-riddled female before him.

This was his *ángelita*. *Naked*. Only one sans wings, white robe and halo.

Juliana was definitely missing the halo.

Mesmerized, he drank in the sight of her curvaceous body—the way her wet, wavy hair hung in strands around her shoulders and down her chest and back, the way sweat dampened her sun-kissed skin, the adorable freckles that now dotted her nose, the red welt a collision with sticker bush had scratched across her abdomen.

He could barely breathe. Think straight. All he wanted to do was turn her over his knee and spank some sense into her.

Fuck her tight little bottom until she screamed his name—just as she did when Cord was screwing her.

Had she gone completely crazy?

Had he? Why was he letting her torture him like this?

Rio couldn't take being toyed with. Teased. Not anymore. "What do you want?"

She looked up at him with huge eyes, licked her lips before responding. "You."

Her fingers fiddled with something and he looked closer. A small silver wrapper—a condom. Ah. Rio wasn't sure quite what to make of that, though his cock was voicing its opinion with undue enthusiasm. Rio remained silent.

"I want..." Her words trailed off. A single tear rolled down her cheek but she smiled through it. "I want *you*."

So she wanted *him* to finally fuck her? Then fuck her he would. He'd take her body over and over, not stopping until she begged for mercy. Until she never, ever wanted another man. Until she belonged to him—and him only—heart and soul.

He'd take nothing less and she was about to learn that. "Get over here then."

Juliana ran into his arms and Rio pulled her into a fierce embrace, taking her lips with a hard kiss. He plunged his tongue into her mouth and swept the dark, honeyed cavern, tasting her. Branding her. How long he'd waited to sample her flavor again—forever, it seemed.

She was so pure, the sweetness of berries fresh on her breath. He licked and sucked her lips then focused again on the inner recesses of her mouth.

Moaning, she pressed her body against his, crushing her breasts into his chest and twisting so he could feel the hardened buds of her nipples through his shirt.

Need scorched his cock, fire blazing along his shaft, demanding release. He couldn't wait, not another second. *This* was him? *His* body that had gone all uncontrollable and impatient? *Madre de Dios!* She was pushing him over the edge.

With a groan, he wrenched free and tugged her around, so that her back rested against the oak. Pinning her against the rough bark with his hands locked on her shoulders, Rio kissed and hummed along her neck, down her throat, stopping to tongue that tiny hollow at its base. She writhed beneath his lips and he skated lower, to her breasts.

The aching hole in his chest grew wider. His soul was so hungry, famished for her, but his heart needed more than her body. Rio needed to know she was his now. Completely his.

He bit at her nipple, releasing her shoulders to gather her breasts in his palms. "Thank God you've changed your mind."

She arched into his touch with a small cry. "What-what do you mean?"

"About me. Me and you," he spoke around her nipple, his heart soaring.

Grabbing his face, she ran her fingers over his cheeks, coaxing him to look at her. She stared deep into his eyes, searching for understanding. "Rio, I never *stopped* wanting to be with you. Never."

And yet, she'd been with Cord all this time.

*Why?*

"And Cord?" he ground out, taking both her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, squeezing the buds as if to punish her.

She cried out but passion filled her gaze. "I want to be with Cord too. I...I love him."

"Shit." He squeezed harder, hard enough to hurt. For once, *wanting* to hurt.

She moaned and pushed against him.

Rio gentled his touch instantly. What had become of him? Would he rather cause her pain than let her be with another?

*Yes!* his head cried.

*No!* his heart protested.

"Please, Rio..." she whimpered, dropping the condom and tangling her fingers in his hair, tugging. "I love you too! Can't you just love me back? Please..."

He wanted to so badly, but how could he escape the certainty that part of her heart now belonged to Cord? Which part, how big of a part, he wondered, feeling her fingernails scrape along his scalp.

Closing his eyes, Rio rested his body against hers. Juliana was so warm, so soft...yet he was so hard for her. Incredibly so. Because she wanted *him*, scarred and imperfect—in body and action. But still, she wanted *him* and God only knew how long and how ferociously he'd wanted her. Juliana. *Ángelita*.

And she was asking him to share her.

*To share her.*

A single ray of sunshine pierced the overhead branches, glinting off the condom wrapper. As though enlightenment followed light, Rio suddenly realized that if sharing was the only way to be with her, to make her happy, then he would. He'd share her because *she* needed that and *he* needed her. And she was willing to be his...

That meant more than anything else—no matter what it took of him, no matter what he had to give. He could relinquish his pride if it meant experiencing heaven in return.

"Yes, yes I can." Rio nodded and lifted her breasts together, kissing them, massaging them. Pleasuring her.

He rubbed his thumbs around the pert nipples crowning the beautiful mounds, felt their hardness beneath his lips and tongue, knew any price was worth having *this*...Juliana supple and willing, *eager* for his touch. He kissed below her breasts, down her belly to her navel, and pressed his tongue inside, making her stomach flex.

Giggling, she tightened her grasp on his hair and Rio fell to his knees on the dried leaves and dirt, ready to worship the woman he adored.

His lips slid to the ugly scratch marring her abdomen, kissed along its length, felt the textured bumps where her skin had torn during her mad flight. How he wished he could erase it. Wished she could do the same to his scars, so he never had to feel embarrassed or self-conscious again. So he could be whole. Be the man she clearly needed.

But he couldn't.

And then a stubborn part of him wanted to swear, to push her away, to end this between them. But his cock was still erect and throbbing. He still wanted — no, *needed* — her. Maybe alone he wasn't man enough for Juliana, but he knew he could give her pleasure. Maybe even make her forget that someone else existed...

For a while at least. If not forever.

Juli stood there, braced against the tree, her entire body trembling like a virgin's who didn't have any idea what might come next. Only Juli *knew* and still she vibrated from head to toe, helpless to stop shaking as she watched Rio put his hands on the insides of her thighs and spread her legs wide. He pressed his nose to her mons and sent his tongue straight up her folds.

"I love the way you taste," he murmured into her. He groaned and licked deeper.

Tingles of anticipation danced throughout her pussy and Juli rested her head against the tree, giving herself up to his mouth.

This wasn't how she'd intended things to be. She'd wanted to heal him, to convince him that she thought his scars of honor were as sexy as he was. To break down the barriers between them.

Instead, Rio was ravaging her, making demands on her body.

Demands on her heart...

And she was torn.

He sucked her clit, drawing the knot of nerves deeply into his mouth and flicking over it with the tip of his tongue. Juli tried not to move. God, her legs were shaking. Winding her fingers through his hair, she held on, stifling a moan when Rio again nudged her clit with his tongue, back and forth, up and down, around and around, driving her mad, sucking at her labia at the same time. His fingers skirted around her hips, grabbed her ass and drew her even closer to his mouth. He squeezed her bottom, holding it tight as he licked her.

Ecstasy whirled through her, rendering her incapable of logical thought. All that occupied her mind was the yearning for his cock, buried deep inside her, fulfilling her every fantasy — her teenage whims, her adult needs.

Unable to contain herself, Juli freed her restraint and rode his face. Bucked wildly. Anything to erase the ache. To satisfy her screaming body.

Yet it wasn't enough. Despite it all, part of her felt empty inside. Her loins kept twitching, taunting her. She craved more...

"God, Rio," she pleaded, trying to keep from bumping against his mouth. "I want *you* inside me this time. Stop. Stop before—"

"Come now," Rio coaxed, his words whispering over her inflamed skin. "I want to taste you, my angel."

Not *ángelita*, but angel...

Cord's nickname for her. Had Rio heard him?

The demand pressed in on her, filled her throbbing loins. *Cord*. God. It was him she craved. Needed.

She threw her head back, crying out in desperation. *Why? Why was she like this?* Thinking such things repeatedly. Never being satisfied.

She loved and desired both men, so very much. But that could never be. Never!

Pretending wasn't enough. She needed the real thing. And she couldn't have that.

Leaves crinkled, drawing her attention, and there he was—Cord. Resting against a tree off the beaten path, grinning at her, his face flushed. She looked at him urgently, pleading with her eyes for him to join them.

Cord just smiled, placing two fingers to his heart then his lips. He blew her a kiss.

And she knew, *knew* he was there with her, even though he wasn't. He was in her heart, a part of her very soul.

Rio's tongue dove into her pussy, fucking her steadily. Her orgasm built with every stroke, flying higher and higher until she detonated. Her body shook, the walls of her cunt rippled around his plunging tongue and cream gushed from her as Rio's hands pressed deeper into the crevice of her butt, holding her tight. Reminding her he was there.

Reminding her who wasn't.

All at once, Juli collapsed, mentally and physically exhausted.

Climbing up her torso, Rio held her steady and rose to his feet. "You okay?"

No, she wasn't. Not at all.

Rio's entire body pulsed with fiery need. His cock ached for release. But he refused to take her against a tree. No, dammit, he was going to do this right.

Bending his knees, he picked up the condom, still in its wrapper then he hoisted a limp Juliana into his arms. "Come on. We're taking the rest of this inside."

She tensed. "You won't change your mind and stop?"

"Not on your life."

"Will...will you disappear again?"

"Never, I swear. And I'll keep telling you that every day for the rest of our lives so you never have to ask again." He started forward.

She hummed her appreciation and nestled against him. Then she tensed again. "But your boots! You're barefoot!"

"And you're not."

"I mean —"

"I know what you mean and I assure you I can get you safely to the house without going back to put them on." His feet might be used to the terrain but his arms weren't. "Now hush, woman. I'm savoring here."

Rio hugged her naked body tight, cradling the most precious of bundles, and carried Juliana to the house.

In the six minutes it took for him to arrive, his erection didn't falter, not even a little. By the time he carried her upstairs to his bedroom, he was ready to drive into her and drive them both right off the map.

Tossing the condom on a pillow, Rio leaned forward, dropped Juliana on the mattress and crawled over her, covering her body with his. "I've waited a hell of a long time for this."

She leveraged her hands between them. "Wait!"

Pushing at his chest, she rolled him off and sat up.

*Wait?* He groaned. "You know, my cock feels like it's about to rip a hole right through my jeans."

Her laughter was like music.

"Grrr...you animal!" Kicking off her sandals, she climbed over him and tugged at the buttons of his shirt. "We need to get you undressed."

His fingers joined hers, fumbling to get his shirt off. "Ten tamales says I can take care of that a lot faster than you can."

"Who said I want this to happen fast?"

Above him, like an avenging angel bent on *his* destruction, Juliana pushed his hands away and continued working the buttons with exaggerated care, excruciating slowness.

Dammit, she was going to make him lose his hard-on. "*Ángelita. Please.*"

"Shhh." She silenced his protest with her lips then tugged the edges of his shirt wide. At that maddening slower-than-molasses pace, she straddled his legs and kissed at his chest, concentrating on the delicate, nerve-infused skin of his scars. Heat rose to his face.

"Juliana!"

She only kissed his battered body more thoroughly.

Arching, he grabbed her by the shoulders. "Juliana, please."

Her eyes locked with his, unrelenting in the harsh light of day. Damn, but he felt exposed. There were no lamps to douse, no curtains to draw, just broad daylight streaming in from the window, showcasing his imperfections, displaying the proof of his sins. One dainty finger trailed over skin he could barely stand to look at. "You're sensitive here, aren't you?"

"Hell yes."

She leaned down and traced the path with her tongue. "Does this send chills through you?"

"Yeah, dammit," he said through gritted teeth. "Knock it off."

"Are they the good kind or the bad kind?" And she did it again while grinding the vee of her pussy over his erection.

"Both."

Defying him, her tongue stroked lovingly over his worst scar. "If I were repulsed by your scars, do you think I could kiss them like this?"

"Jesus, Juliana—" How the hell was he still erect? Impossible but he was.

"I think they're so damn sexy." She kissed, she licked. "Marks of courage. Of honor." She kept nuzzling her lips over his scars. "Do you have others? Tell me where," she persisted when he pressed his lips tight, fighting to hold in his protest, his plea.

He couldn't answer. He shouldn't. What he needed to do was make her stop.

Yet part of him was beginning to enjoy the feel of her mouth on his old injuries, loving him, loving away the pain.

"Rio..." she breathed across his skin. "I won't quit until you—"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"On my leg. My...groin, but you already—"

"I already *nothing*," she declared, sitting up and swatting his hands away when he halfheartedly made an attempt to stop her progress to his fly. "It was dark that night. We were on the side of the road. *In* your vehicle, if you'll remember, you unromantic...*hombre*," she continued, and he could tell she'd just barely kept herself from calling him a jerk. Rio fought a reluctant smile and endured her continued explorations.

"Now we're on a real bed. You're not in my imagination—you're real too. And I'm determined to touch every part of you before I'm done."

How was it he knew that she didn't just mean touch him physically, either?

And how was it that her confident avowal didn't send him skulking off into hiding, but instead made him yearn to be worthy of her unfathomable interest? Made his cock harden further and strain against his fly in readiness...made his heart swell with gratitude and wonder that he was here, right now, in bed with Juliana Reed, with her



hands and lips—and gorgeous, flushed cunt spread wide above him...glistening—for him?

So Rio relaxed into the mattress, left off protesting and counted himself one lucky son of a bitch when Juliana tugged the button of his denims free, eased the zipper down and guided him to lift his hips so she could pull his jeans and underwear off. Rio figured himself saved by the love of an angel when her honest expression took in the view of his body, the left side of his groin and upper thigh, and didn't shrink back. If anything, the acceptance in her eyes blazed hotter as she caressed both sides of his body, the shiny, hairless, scarred parts, as well as the dark hair covering his healthy skin on the others.

"You know," she murmured, "I always imagined your legs would be hairy. Manly. And they are." Her mouth was everywhere, brushing over his thighs, kissing and licking up and down the deep disfigurement on the left, teasing him unmercifully. Healing him. "Very manly."

He felt her every word like a cattle prod to his heart as he lifted under her touch. She was right about his scars—her lips and tongue on the sensitized area of his groin were enough to make him come. His every nerve was alive. Electrified.

"Do you know Cord has a scar or two himself?"

Jealousy infused him and unaccountably Rio wanted his scars to be worse. His pain to be more. Anything for Juliana's attention.

"No kidding," he groaned. His fingers wound in her hair and he tried to guide her to his cock, the only part of his body she seemed to be ignoring. If he kept her mouth busy then she couldn't compare him to another man. Couldn't tell him he was lacking.

"Yup." She grabbed the condom and Rio noticed that her breathing had grown unsteady. "And his cock is slightly crooked."

Her hand on his rod made him dizzy...so dizzy he was hearing things. "What?"

Then she was tearing into the package and slipping the rubber over his shaft. "Crooked," she murmured. She rose up and kissed the scar on his cheek, lingering. "I find it sexy. I find *you* sexy. Always have, always will. I'd hope to explore more of you with my mouth but..." Scooting up his body, she lifted her knees, positioning her cunt over his cock. "I want you too badly to wait."

But then she did just that—made him wait. Poised above him, her tempting body on blatant display hovered just inches above his ceiling-bound cock, torturing him—and for what? "Why...stop?" he grunted like a caveman.

Juliana smiled and pointed to a spot on her inner thigh. "Have you ever seen my birthmark?"

Having his attention directed there, just millimeters away from her swollen, pink pussy only increased the caveman tendencies clamoring through him. He wanted to rear up, roll her over and pound into her until forever. But he didn't. Patience hanging by a thread, erection pulsing with strength, Rio finally felt like a whole *man*.

He fisted handfuls of sheet and gritted, "Birthmark?"

"I'm not perfect, you know?" And that tantalizing finger of hers started caressing her inner flesh.

"Doesn't matter," he strangled out.

"Neither do your scars." Her sex-juice slickened finger went to the head of his dick and she painted it with her essence. "Neither do your scars. Neither do your —"

Control shot, Rio released the sheet and pressed his hands into the flesh of her hips, holding her tight above him. "I know that," he interrupted, fingers flexing uncontrollably, drawing her inviting flesh closer to home. "I believe you. Just needed to hear it again. To finally *feel* it." *A couple hundred thousand times...be mine forever?*

Smiling as if he'd given her diamonds, Juliana leaned into his touch and eased her pussy down over his cock, wrapping him in heaven in one smooth, gliding motion. His entire world shifted.

"Do you feel it now?" she whispered, clutching him with her inner muscles, staring at him with those searing baby blues.

He arched his pelvis against hers and thrust high, watching the pistoning action as his body disappeared inside hers, the pale condom shining in the light, sparkling back at him with the proof of her passion. "God yes."

"Promise me."

She didn't say what, she didn't have to. It didn't need to be spoken, it was understood. She wanted his assurance that he knew his scars didn't matter — not to her. And he did know it. Finally. "I promise."

He lunged higher and she gasped. "God, I feel full. My body...my heart..."

Around his shaft, her pussy clasped him with hungry intent. Sitting tall, she rode him hard, taking his cock deep and fast. She was so wet, silky with desire and hot...damn hot. Paradise.

Rio felt his balls tighten and draw up, heard his breath change to ragged pants, knew the mother of all orgasms was approaching fast. He grabbed Juliana's ass and steadied her plunges. Made every last one count. Concentrated on the sensations his fingers encountered as they explored her butt, feathering over the supple skin as he learned her every crack and crevice.

Juliana shuddered and lurched against him, taking his cock deeper. Leaning forward, she braced herself against his chest and cried out in climax, her muscles tightening, her pussy convulsing in a rapid rhythm that was uniquely hers as she came over him, planted breathy kisses against his shoulder and hummed her release. He held his breath and savored every sensation, every sound.

With a satisfied moan, she straightened and arched back into his hands, allowing him full view of their connection. Rio blinked the sweat out of his eyes and watched her juices run down his shaft, into his groin, drowning old doubts right out of his soul.

Unable to wait another second, he gave himself over to his body's demands and came deep inside her with a shout, filling the condom with years of repressed need. Filling his life with Juliana.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Blowing out a tired breath, Cord set the axe aside and looked out toward the setting sun, soaking in the remaining warmth of the day. For once, the wind was at rest. Nothing stirred and he simply savored the moment, the peace hovering just on the fringes.

*Home.* He drew in the realization, noticing the odd...*calm* that filled his being, made him feel almost buoyant.

Calm? No. Scratch that. He was pleased. Exhilarated almost—he'd just watched another man lick his woman's pussy, saw Juli's own heat and excitement dripping from her, and he was glad about it. Hell, seeing her come over Rio's face had nearly made him shoot a load.

But more than that, Cord felt good knowing that Rio was upstairs getting some. Made no damn sense, but what about this situation did? Ever since hitching home almost three weeks ago—man, it seemed so much longer—and being blindsided by all the changes and losses, this afternoon was the most peaceful one Cord had spent. Almost as if he knew things would work out—somehow—between all of them.

Exactly how, he hadn't a clue, but Rio was a good man. He'd become a friend. He didn't deserve his scars, not any more than Cord deserved his tortured soul. And just as she did for him, Juli could bring pleasure. Erase pain.

Cord wasn't about to rob Rio of that opportunity. Sure, he couldn't help but brood over what Rio and Juli might be doing at the moment, couldn't help but be tempted to spy, but he had this damn woodpile to keep him busy. Winter wasn't far off. Who knew what the new season would bring? He wanted to be ready.

Wiping sweat from his brow, Cord returned to his chopping. He worked steadily, piece by piece, just as he had the past hour or more, balancing each new limb on the block and splitting it, expelling any remaining frustrations on the oak logs.

Time passed then more, and he kept on chopping, almost afraid to stop, to analyze further.

The twitching in his loins constantly reminded him what was going on—what he was missing. And Cord just kept swinging the axe. Kept using his body by rote—turn, bend, lift, carry, place, center, swing and *thwack!*

Kept using muscles in patterned movements that no longer required any thought at all, yet perversely Cord attempted to give every motion, every contraction or release of each muscle his utmost attention. Hips, buttocks, arms, shoulders, neck, fingers, back. *Back...*

Was Juli upstairs on her back or was Rio on his? Had she climbed on top?

*Thwack!*

Was she licking Rio's cock, or was Rio sampling her flesh again? Was he pounding into her even now?

The axe missed the block and cleared Cord's booted foot by three inches.

"Damn!" He stood staring at his intact foot and leg, feeling the strain of the unlanded axe reverberate up his arms, over his shoulders and down his back then settle in his groin. With an oath, he tore off one glove and placed his bare palm over his thundering heart. "And that, Ramsey, is why you pay attention when working with tools with sharp edges."

Soon the rhythmic crack of wood could be heard throughout the clearing and the pile of uncut wood dwindled fast, a testament to Cord's newfound attention. By the time the chopped stack reached almost to his waist, Cord heard the back door creak open. A second later it banged shut and rapid footfalls stomped over the porch then hit the ground, heading toward him.

Cord didn't look away from his task. He knew it was Rio even before he said a word. Cord waited. And kept right on swinging the axe.

Rio came up beside him, bare feet and all, and Cord sneaked a glance upward. Rio had his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans, shoulders hunched. He was contemplating Cord as a preacher would evaluate a sinner.

Cord's hands flexed around the handle and he paused, unsure what would happen now. Did the shit hit the fan? Rio hit him? Or did they act as if nothing had changed? Ready to take his cue from Rio, Cord angled his head, tossing his too-long hair out of his eyes. "Hey."

"You know she came to me." Rio's statement overflowed with unvoiced sentiment. "That we...?"

Rio didn't finish. Didn't need to.

"Yeah." With a jerky nod, Cord looked back at the block and with a mighty arc brought his axe down, chopping the huge piece of oak in half. "Sure do."

"You told her to, didn't you?"

Admitting that was too damn weird.

Cord tossed the wood chunks on the pile behind him then gestured toward the house. "Don't just stand there lookin' like a mean *hombre* who lost his horse. Go put your shoes on and make yourself useful. Hand me some damn wood."

Silently, Rio returned to the porch and drew on his socks and boots, which were sitting on the top step, not commenting on how Cord had known exactly which tree he'd left them at or about what all Cord may have witnessed going on under that very tree.

With every second Cord waited, his muscles tensed further.

Two minutes later, Rio was back, setting up a log. "Here's your *damn* wood," he said with a definite touch of irony. "And, uh, thanks for bringing them up."

"Yeah. Sure." Cord raised the axe then suddenly lost all strength. His shoulders collapsed and he dropped the tool as if it were dead weight. "Dammit."

Mashing his lips together, he returned to staring at the setting sun. Cloudy wisps of orange and purple streaked across the sky in a breathtaking display. He'd been around the world and back and he'd never seen a more beautiful sunset than he had right here at home. Nineteen hundred and eighteen acres and he goddamn wanted every inch back. Rio owned the property, but worse, the most beautiful woman in the universe was wedged right between the both of them. Cord's earlier peace evaporated.

Any fool could see that this situation could go sour quickly. Might as well clear the air. Better that than make an enemy. Rio was a good guy, but hell, a man was a man.

Especially when around one woman—any other man was competition, pure and simple competition. Cord cleared his throat. "Yeah, I sent her."

"You did." Rio looked right at him, stating the obvious.

Their eyes locked, full of unvoiced questions and a heap of curiosity. Doubt and uncertainty were in the mix too, front and center.

Nervously, Cord juggled the axe from one hand to the other. "Let's be clear about one thing—I don't mind the thought of sharing her with you, not nearly as much as I mind the thought of losing her."

Rio nodded. "Understandable."

Cord was quiet a moment, not sure what else to say. He supposed the simple truth was as good as anything. "Juli's an incredible woman and I feel damn lucky every time she as much as smiles at me."

Rio surprised him with a commiserating look. "I suppose we're both damn lucky then."

"Yeah." Cord grinned. Deep inside, it was as if he'd just let go of a fifty-pound weight he'd been hauling around. He instantly felt lighter. "I'd say so. Damn lucky."

"I, um—uh..." Rio laughed self-consciously then threw back his shoulders and extended one arm, proffering his hand to Cord. "Thank you. For everything."

Cord accepted and the two shook. "Much obliged."

*What had just happened?* Rio had thanked him for pimping Juli? Cord stifled a laugh. A crazy situation had just gone certifiable—and he was happy about it? Heck. Cord did laugh—out loud.

The right side of his mouth quirking in a responding grin, Rio reached into his back pocket and pulled out several folded papers. "Here." He handed them to Cord. "The deed to your place, as promised."

Cord felt as if he'd been kicked in the chest—with that fifty-pound weight and then some. "I didn't tell Juli to go to you for this."

"You think I don't know that? Don't be a *pendejo* or I will bust that ugly nose of yours again. It'd be a pity too, now that it's healed." Rio waved the stack in front of Cord. "Take it. It's yours as agreed. You kept her here, kept her safe."

"I...thank you." Cord accepted the deed, fingering the crisp edges. *Home*. He had his home back. He ought to be relieved but... "You're not leaving now, are you?"

"No." Rio took the axe from him. "Not yet. It's definitely not safe for Juliana to return to DC. The last time I checked with Tom, he told me the bastards after her offed the man who gave her whatever evidence she has – evidence she still won't give up. She insists upon testifying. Stupid, gutsy woman. I don't know whether to throttle her or applaud her courage."

"I'm with you there." Cord stepped back and grabbed the next log, balancing it on the block. "But you can't let her testify. That'll be like painting a bull's-eye on her back. She'll be dead for sure. Either that or go into witness protection."

"Tell me something I don't know." Rio heaved the axe downward and the harsh crack of splitting wood filled the air. "We get that evidence from her and destroy it then there isn't much she can testify to, now is there? It's underhanded, but Juliana morally outraged and alive is better than Juliana dead – any day of the week. I can handle her anger, but dammit, we need to know what this Mitchell character gave her and time's running out." He stood back and looked at Cord with a wry grin. "Let's face it. She may love us both, but she likes you better."

Cord chuckled. "You want me to get it out of her? Find out what she's hiding?"

"It'd be a start."

Cord set up another log. "I'll see what I can do."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Heya, darlin'. Hold up a minute."

The sound of Cord's honey-smooth voice arrested her steps and Juli stopped on the landing, turning just outside her – no, *their* – bedroom.

"Hey, darlin' yourself," she copycatted. After a long afternoon of sexual exploration with Rio, she had an evening snack in hand and wanted nothing more than some space to her clear mind, some time to think about things...about them all. "What's up? I was about to eat."

Fact was, she'd just made love to Rio. Had, in an emotionally hungry moment after Rio left to shower, found and put on the watch he'd given her, admired the glistening gold links of the band and relived how he'd stroked then kissed her wrist, along with every other part of her body...so sensually, so possessively.

She couldn't get over how it felt, being taken by Rio.

But she also wore the Carolina Panthers nightshirt Cord had given her and he consumed a large portion of her thoughts even now. It was all too weird.

"Looks good on you." Cord cornered her against the wall and brushed the hair from her face. His beautiful golden-green eyes, far from being sad or haunted today, sparkled down at her with pure intent.

Her body, already heated like butter on hot waffles, almost melted to the floor when he pressed close, treating her to that patented lopsided smile of his—the one that showed off the sexy little dimple on the left side of his mouth, even through all that scruff covering his jaw. Those gorgeous lips of his—now healed from the split Rio had inflicted the morning they met—hovered just above hers in threat of a kiss.

So much for clearing her mind.

Cord had an irresistible way about him and Juli wasn't sure she wanted to resist—one touch and her brain was muddled with dirty thoughts.

"I'm glad you put it on," he said while copping a feel in the guise of touching the panther's ear. "I knew you'd appreciate me giving my little wildcat a wildcat."

"Little wildcat?" Since when did he call her that? Her snack forgotten, Juli arched against his exploring finger, wondering how she could *want* again—so soon, so easily. Shouldn't she be dissuading him? At least a little?

His palm settled directly upon her breast, causing her nipple to tighten. Her pussy to clench.

But then why should she discourage him? She loved him. And he certainly knew what she'd been doing the past couple of hours *with another man*. If he didn't mind, why should she?

"I need something from you, angel." Cord pulled his hand away, planted it at her hip and gave her a little shake. "Something only you can provide."

"Oh, do you now?" She needed something from him too...though she had no idea how that could be, considering she'd just climaxed. *Twice*.

His glittering gaze narrowed and that adorable dimple deepened when he smiled. "Mmm, hmm. I surely do."

The thought of making love to Cord so soon after being intimate with Rio spiked her body's response. She squeezed her thighs together, trying to stop their trembling. She couldn't, *shouldn't*, be with Cord right now.

*Could she?*

As if defying her internal thoughts, he leaned forward and kissed the corner of her mouth. "The evidence you have that's so all-fired important to Rio..." Cord pulled on her bottom lip with his teeth then released. "Tell me about it."

"Tell you what?" Her lips throbbed. Juli stuck her tongue out to lick the bottom one, licking Cord's mouth at the same time.

He reciprocated, allowing his tongue to duel with hers while he spoke. "Like where're you keepin' it."

Guard abruptly up, Juli stiffened her spine and stiffened her tongue but allowed Cord to continue caressing it with his. "Why do you want to know?" she murmured between tongue kisses. Why was she so susceptible around him? Around Rio? And why did he have to go and bring this up *now*? "Hmmm?"



"I don't want you gettin' hurt, baby." The tip of his tongue flirted with hers. "Just tell me what you've got on 'em and —"

Juli bit down.

"Ow!" Cord jerked back, barely avoiding severing his tongue. "Shit, Juli!"

"And what? You'll go running to Rio?" She couldn't believe him — the sexy asshole!

"What'd you go and do that for?"

She gave him a well-deserved shove with her free hand. "He put you up to this, didn't he?"

Like two boys playing hooky and protecting each other's back, Cord just smiled with wide-eyed innocence. "Now why would I listen to him? He's had my girl all to himself the better part of the day."

Her lips still tingled, pussy pulsed. Anus squeezed tight.

Men! Why, *how*, could she fantasize about being with *two* of them? One was more than enough. Juli fisted her hands to keep from shoving him again — or pulling him closer — and remembered her snack.

Cord lunged in to kiss her but she sidestepped and upended the coffee mug of cornflakes and milk over his head, diving into the bedroom and slamming the door shut behind her. For once, the ancient lock working in her favor.

"Damn, woman, this shit is cold," he hollered through the thick door.

"So's your side of the bed tonight." Bastard.

"Aw, Jules, let me in." His voice had turned to honey again.

Honey. Hmmm, that would've tasted great on her cornflakes. Oh well. She wasn't about to open the door and eat them off his shoulder. She'd never liked soggy cereal.

"Come on, angel, we'll talk. That's it."

"Not on your life, buster. And clean up that mess. Milk gets sticky when it dries."

At his underhanded tactics, her desire transformed into irritation, which she expressed by refusing to answer him again, no matter how many times he pleaded. Finally, she heard his footsteps jog down the stairs in defeat — either that or he was running back to his good buddy Rio to tell him they needed another plan. Argh!

Like any normal human being, Cord could've asked outright what she had on Tito. She might have told him now that things had progressed so far. Heaven knew she could use another opinion about the entire situation and what she should do. It would've been nice to hear Cord's advice.

But no, he tries to act all charming, as if she were nothing more than a brainless piece of pussy to be seduced to his will and that ticked her off to no end.

Juli crossed the room and flounced on the bed, growing infuriated all over again when she heard the screen door bang shut and male voices below. Through the crack in the window, she listened as they talked about her... Her unwillingness to turn over the

evidence, how they could best protect her, how stubborn women could be—they were ones to talk—blah, blah, blah.

Eventually they moved on to discussing lighter matters, specifically *the night sky*, while Rio taught Cord the constellations after Cord asked. That was her and Cord's thing, dammit, and here she was, in bed all alone and the men were outside talking as if they were old friends. Pals. School chums.

Old friends, *dammit*, when if it wasn't for her, they wouldn't even know each other. Meanwhile, she was stuck inside lonely and confused. And hungry.

Rolling onto her belly, Juli buried her face in the pillow and rammed her fists against the mattress, her feet kicking empty air as she fought throat-thickening, eye-dampening emotion.

Why, *why* was she torturing herself like this? Why not give up the evidence, abandon the stupid story she no longer cared about and...and simply *let Rio go from her life once and for all*?

Maybe holding out, going public with the interview, wouldn't even be enough to save her. Juli had to face it. Johnson Mitchell had supplied her with a long list of dirty cops, but in the end, there was no way of knowing if it contained *all* of them. Even Tom, much as Rio trusted him...

How was she to know? She didn't.

The bottom line? The Benitos surely weren't the only ones willing to kill to shut her up. Then again, if she broadcast this information, *a lot* of bad guys would be hungry for revenge and gunning for her.

Maybe she was fighting for control of something completely out of her hands. Maybe giving up the proof and hiding here with Cord was the only thing left for her to do, if she wanted to live. If she wanted any kind of life or love or happiness. She'd already lost her parents to the act of an unbalanced zealot doing what he thought was right. Had lost Rio—and herself—for ten long years as a consequence.

Did she just want to be a crusader for causes the rest of her life? Or did she want something more?

Something impossible...

With a groan of frustration, Juli let her fist fly one last time then flopped over, straining to listen to their conversation below.

Two very different voices. Two very different men. With at least two things in common...

They both thought she should trash what she had on the Benitos. *And they both owned a piece of her heart.*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Confident she no longer had any aspirations of leaving—and they were right—the guys were out in the barn.

“Man stuff,” Cord had told her two hours ago with a wink.

“Clearing out the old shit,” Rio had said with a shrug then added once Cord exited through the back door, “I think having me out there helps him sort through his grandparents’ accumulated junk. You don’t mind, do you?”

Juli’d kissed his jaw, the side that still grew whiskers, and thought how he was starting to act like Cord—Rio’s face hadn’t seen the edge of a razor in several days, but then, for a while, neither had her legs so who was she to complain?

Especially since, with every day Rio remained at Willow Creek, spending time with her and Cord, the more she noticed him relaxing, the weight he carried on his shoulders easing.

Did she mind him being a friend to Cord? “Nope, of course not. I think it’s good for you both. Besides, I’m trying out my rusty cooking skills today and don’t need either of you underfoot.”

She just hoped they weren’t out there plotting against her.

Humming to herself, Juli tossed the salad then carried it and the basket of rolls into the dining room, placing them next to the other side dishes already on the lace-covered table. Earlier, she’d picked fresh wildflowers down by the creek. Mostly weeds, she figured, but they were pretty weeds and now bunched together in couple of mismatched vases. She smiled, surveying the sight.

Juli couldn’t remember the last time she’d enjoyed cooking a real meal—one that didn’t start out in a box. Must be the surroundings—it was so homey here, so comfortable. Nothing like her ultra-modern decor. Nothing like the city. It had been so long since she’d stood in front of a cameraman, weighing her every word, that she’d forgotten what it felt like and no longer cared to remember.

The longer she stayed on the plantation, the less she could imagine going back to her old life. The less she wanted to.

The more she realized that maybe she didn’t have to. That doing so might endanger her life. If Rio was to be believed and she didn’t have any reason not to trust him, not any longer, then she’d be a fool to continue her personal crusade.

Who said she had to return to Washington? Why not change her life, stay here for love? *Because half your love is leaving.*

Rio wouldn’t stay.

She knew that and it tied her heart in knots. But Juli refused to think about that right now. Didn't want to. She needed to keep busy.

With a sigh, she returned to the kitchen and peered in the oven at the lemon chicken. Perfect—just about done. She'd followed the dog-eared recipe she'd found in the cookbook on the counter exactly. If all went right, Rio and Cord were going to love it.

She hoped so, after giving them the meticulously prepared list of ingredients she needed yesterday when they'd gone into town for more groceries, a few fix-it items and an alternator for Cord's car.

Leaning against the counter, she toyed with the watch Rio had given her—a watch she shouldn't be wearing while cooking, given its value, but she just couldn't help herself. Couldn't help the way she felt about him. Or Cord.

If she'd thought things might become awkward between the three of them after she and Rio finally made love, she'd been wrong. If anything, they'd all grown more comfortable. Other than sneaking covert glances—definitely between her and each of the men, probably between them as well when she wasn't paying attention—the past few days had gone by peacefully.

If it weren't for the reality she was still virtually a prisoner here, well that, and the fact her hair had permanently gone on strike, she could easily lure herself into thinking she was on an extended vacation with two strong and sexy men vying to do her bidding.

Juli laughed out loud at that thought. Do her bidding? Not hardly, though they did do whatever they could to make her happy and keep from wanting to leave. She knew the serene idyll couldn't last. Eventually something had to give. She couldn't stay here forever, holding on to the evidence, making love to two men.

God. Thinking about it all was driving her nuts! Back to work before the men came in to find her crying rather than brandishing the delicious dinner she'd promised.

Cord had told her where his grandmother kept her best china, the beautiful plates he'd used during their one candlelit dinner. Well, it might be early afternoon, but if she was going to the trouble of actually cooking, she was serving her efforts on special dishes. All that remained was taking them down, pulling out the chicken and calling in the men.

Stretching on her toes, Juli slid two plates from the stack on the topmost shelf, but somehow managed to scoot the tower to the side and couldn't reach the third. Jumping a smidge, she grasped the last plate on its edge and pulled.

The plate wobbled from her unsteady grasp. Before she could blink, it nosedived to the floor, shattering on impact. Her stomach dropped right along with it.

*Dammit!* Juli gasped, willing the plate to levitate. Her stomach too. *"Dammit. Fucking dammit!"*

And there she went again, cussing. What the heck was wrong with her? She didn't know herself anymore.

She clutched the remaining two plates to her chest.

*Two not three.* The third plate had slipped and broken.

There could never be three.

Shaking, Juli stepped back, the soles of her new shoes crunching the pieces further.

What was she thinking? Here she was, setting the table, preparing a meal as she would for her husband.

But *husband* wasn't a plural word.

How could she ever put one man in that position? How could she even assume either man wanted to be there?

Country domesticity must have rusted her brain—since when did she want to get married?

*"All I want is to be a mom. One who stays at home and has lots and lots of babies."*

*"Babies grow up, you know, ángelita."*

*"Yeah, but...my kids will be happy. I'll be happy."*

Stupid foolish dreams.

For years, she didn't let another human being get close to her then bam!

Rio comes back. She meets Cord.

And kerflooeey! Life goes haywire and they both slip under her defenses and into her heart when she's not looking.

*Into her heart...* Irritated all over again, with the broken plate and herself, Juli brushed her wild tangle of hair back, ripped a scrunchie from her wrist and wrapped it around the mess.

Wait. Hadn't she pulled her hair up before cooking? She didn't know anymore. Just knew that it was in her face, like a shield, hiding the truth. Or rather, keeping her hidden from reality. Every time she put it up, it fell down again, and dammit, she wanted it out of the way!

Just as she needed to quit pretending. Fooling herself.

Facing the truth was tough, but she had to. Deny it all she could, just like her hair, it was right in front of her face—the reality that she loved them *both*. Differently, yes, but love was love, and she *loved* two men, had gone to sleep the past few nights, dreaming of what life would be like with *both* of them, but like a little girl with a toy oven and fake food, she was only *playing*. Playing make believe. There was no happy ending to this situation.

What if she did make love to both Rio and Cord at once? Finally fill the ache that plagued her? Would the insane dreams stop or only grow stronger?

As if observing a stranger, Juli watched trembling hands put the remaining two plates on the counter, but her chaotic thoughts wouldn't be shelved so easily. The longer she went on playacting, the worse she'd be hurt when it all came crashing down on top of her.

She couldn't go through losing everything—everyone. *Not again.* Pressure hit behind her nose and forehead. Her throat felt raw. She couldn't breathe, couldn't see.

Stumbling forward, Juli tore through the house. She knew the guys were out back, so she fled through the front door and took off running. Running for her life as hard as she could, across the overgrown yard, down the driveway, desperate to evade the conflicting emotions coming at her from all sides, squeezing the air from her lungs. She ran faster, harder, until her side cramped and her leg muscles protested. Her chest burned and still she ran.

But she couldn't run fast enough.

The low drone of a car creeping down the dirt lane filled her ears. *Rio.*

Frantic, she glanced behind her, expecting to see his SUV, but the lane was empty. She turned back around, her vision blurry from unshed tears.

But the dust cloud forming in front of her was clear enough. She wiped her eyes in time to see a vehicle topping the rise. Creeping straight toward her.

Everything came to a standstill and Juli found herself staring doom in the face. Her heart stopped beating. The Earth stopped spinning. The sun ceased to glow and shadows overtook her...

Because heading directly at her, not twenty yards away, was a black Mercedes inching up the long dirt lane.

Juli jumped off the road, aiming for the nearest tree, but couldn't tear her gaze from the sight. The passenger was a hulk of a man, bald, beady eyes squinting above a broad nose, his arm outstretched, sausage fingers drumming on the side mirror. But that wasn't what made her heart come to life with a thundering boom, stutter then start jackhammering in her chest. It was the driver. The one who rolled down his window as if he were doing nothing more than going for a Sunday stroll, the one who...

Who had to be the kingpin, Anthony "Tito" Benito.

*Ohmygod.*

A dapper dresser, she'd always heard, the smarmy, black-hair-slicked-back-from-a-receding-hairline little man wore a freaking suit to an assassination. A freaking suit! Juli knew it was him by the pink carnation boutonniere in his lapel—his calling card for death.

Closer now, she saw the maniacal tilt to his mouth, knew the evil eyes shielded with mirrored aviators had to be glowing red. The brothers had been misnamed, for here was the devil incarnate.

"Take over!" he ordered the passenger, stopping the Mercedes.

She didn't wait to hear what else he had to say because once again, Juli was running for her life.

Cutting through the thickest part of the woods, she dodged branches, stumbled over dead brush and fallen logs. She had to get back to the house, to Rio and Cord. *To the evidence.* It was the only bargaining chip she had.

But was it enough?

## Chapter Twenty-Six

A deafening boom blazed through the air.

The wail of a woman followed, not that it was needed, not when at the gun blast, full awareness had come upon both Rio and Cord.

"Juli!"

"Juliana!"

"Let's go." Cord grabbed the axe and headed for the open doors, his face drawn in anger.

Rio heard the report from a second shot then a third, followed by laughter. Deep, taunting laughter that echoed from who knew how far away? "Hold up a minute," he said in a low voice when they reached the shadowed doorway, placing a hand to Cord's shoulder. His heart pounding in his ears, blood roaring through him in a rush of adrenaline, Rio scanned every bit of land he could see. "We need to know what we're up against."

So they'd been found.

He'd anticipated many things, but not this—not the bastards attacking in broad daylight...toying with her. He knew of Tito's reputed prowess with a gun. If the man was shooting to kill, he wouldn't have used three—no, four!—bullets to do it. Nor would he be wasting his time shouting mocking threats.

*Madre de Dios!* Of every scenario Rio had imagined, this one hadn't made the list.

A bead of sweat rolled down his temple just as Juliana screamed again, the sound growing louder, coming closer. He swore under his breath. At least they hadn't captured her yet...but what the hell was she doing out of the house? He'd thought she was cooking.

"Forget the axe. These guys mean business. You keep a gun out here?" Before Cord had time to shake his head, Rio barked, "In the house?"

Cord didn't let go of the axe. "Huntin' rifle. Spare bedroom."

Rio watched his eyes go dark then lose their focus.

"Is it loaded?"

Cord's lips trembled. "Don't know. Haven't touched it. Not since..."

His words trailed off.

Rio nodded, understanding. Always hard to pick up a gun when the last time one was used had been in war—or to kill somebody. Which Cord very well might need to do today. Son of a bitch!

"You still got ammo for it?"



Cord spoke from a daze. "I imagine, but..."

"Then come on!" Rio tightened his fingers on Cord's shoulder and shook him then sharpened his tone and spoke as quickly and loudly as he dared, even as his legs ached with the desire to go after her. "*Stay with me, junior.* Juliana needs us both. You're going to get up to the house and find that rifle pronto. See that it's loaded. Got it?"

"This is war." Cord stared at him unseeingly.

Dammit!

Rio gripped him harder. "Do you hear me? Get that rifle and get out of sight. You can get a longer shot off from upstairs. I have a handgun in the car." Rio silently cursed himself for not keeping it with him. "I'm going after Juliana. I'll draw their attention away from her if things get too ugly. Now cover me."

"No. No... Me." Cord just stood there, swaying slightly, clutching the handle of the axe. In direct opposition of his earlier flight, Cord now seemed to be in a trance, unable to move. "I need to go after Juliana. Me. Faster. I'm faster. Faster..."

Yeah, but Rio couldn't risk the chance that Cord might shut down altogether and get them all killed.

"Ramsey." Rio snatched the axe from his hold. "Pull it together! You'll have better range—I need you and that rifle upstairs out of sight before they get here. I'll try to draw them out so you can get a clear shot. Come on, Cord, I need you with me on this."

Jesus. Could this get any worse?

If Cord couldn't handle the rifle, how the hell could they fight off the Benitos? No way Rio could do it on his own, especially if Cord was intent on acting the fool and running smack into the center of danger.

Juliana yelled their names and Cord flinched. But nothing else.

Rio lifted his hand and slapped Cord hard across the cheek. "Cord! *Do it!*"

Cord jerked back, blinking swiftly. "Rifle. Upstairs. Got it," Cord assured him, shaking off that haunted look in his eyes. "I'm good. Let's save our girl."

"You sure?"

Cord tensed. Focused. "Hell yeah."

"I'll whistle when I've got a good shot. You do the same," Rio commanded. "Now go!"

They split up, Cord disappearing into the house while Rio jogged around to his SUV. The driver's side was exposed to the yard and he ducked out of sight between the house and SUV. He opened the passenger door and leaned in to fetch the gun from the center console. Just as he palmed the roughened metal grips, searching through the tinted windows to determine the best way to proceed, Juliana burst from the woods, zigzagging like mad and hollering for all she was worth. "Reeeeeeoouooo! Cooorrrrrd!"

His attention snagged back to the dirt lane when a black Mercedes spun into the yard, stopping with a loud screech of brakes and churning up a huge cloud of dust.

*Just how many were there?*

Rio crouched beneath the dash, praying no one had seen him. He snaked out and backed up against the vehicle, readying his pistol with fingers that trembled. Maybe he should have slapped his own cheek.

Staying low, he inched past the hood to peer around the grille.

The Mercedes' engine went dead and a huge motherfucker climbed out of the expensive car and just stood there, grinning like an idiot, watching when Juliana tore past. "Don'tcha wanna slow down, *hermosita*?" the man called in a high-pitched voice, making "beautiful little one" sound more like *stupid bitch*. "Tony'll be likely to shoot off your fingers one at a time if you don't stop."

With another panicked scream, she dodged the Mercedes. Behind her, a mean-looking *hombre* sauntered into the yard, cool as you please.

Rio recognized the pair—Diablo Benito, the vermin by the car, heavysset and sweaty, busting right out of his clothes, but not giving a damn about anything but scratching his crotch and laughing at the terror on Juliana's face, and his brother Tito, a damn ugly weasel of a man, despite the smart black suit and expensive sunglasses he wore.

"Cord! Rio!" Juliana's cry echoed plaintively in the stillness.

*Dammit!* She needed to quit calling their names.

"Ms. Reed," Tito said calmly, mockingly, his deep voice carrying well. "Keep running and I'll stop shooting air. It's a waste of bullets, you see, and I don't like waste."

Juliana didn't acknowledge him. Just continued her weaving flight.

"Care to keep your kneecaps? Your neck?" Tito lurched to the side, evidently tripping over the dried grass. He glanced at his feet and veins bulged in his neck. "You've got my goddamn Belvederes filthy!"

Losing patience and redirecting his gun from the sky toward Juliana, Tito shouted, "Diablo, grab her. I'm thinking the *puta* needs to kiss my shoes."

Tito had stopped in the center of the yard, well away from the woods, yet keeping himself far from the house. Dammit. Rio knew he could shoot him but wasn't sure how accurate he'd be at this distance, neither did he know whether that shit Diablo was armed. He couldn't take the chance, not yet.

"Rio!" Juliana kept running, kept screaming. "Cord!"

The hardest thing Rio ever did was force himself to remain hidden. *Just a little closer, baby...*

Unintentionally she was leading the bastards right into a trap, but if she wasn't careful she was going to get her damn fool neck shot in the process.

*Stop!* he willed her, hoping Juliana would trust him enough to know he and Cord were in place, ready to protect her with their lives. *Parate, ángelita. Stop!* he pleaded silently.

As if someone in the universe heard him and decided to grant a miracle, Juliana stumbled and fell to her knees. He watched her grab handfuls of dirt. Breathing heavily, she rose to her feet and shrugged a glare at Tito. "Shoot me and you'll never know exactly what I have on you. Or where it is. And I'll never kiss your feet. Never! Kick your ass, maybe."

*Madre de Dios.* She shouldn't be taunting him!

"I didn't say I'd kill you," Tito snarled, his urbane polish having vanished. He took three steps closer. "But I know at least twenty-seven ways I can make you wish you were dead."

Diablo lumbered toward Juliana and her eyes darted around, looking for escape. Rio saw her gaze skitter past the corner of the house, return for a split second and then the flash of recognition she quickly hid before focusing again on the man closing in on her.

*Cord.* Thank God. He was inside and Juliana knew it. Now if they could just get a clear shot...

"Oh yeah? Well, I know twenty-seven ways to get you the death penalty. Wanna try me?" she shouted back.

Coming up behind her, Diablo wrenched her arms behind her back, effectively shutting her up. He forced Juliana to walk in front of him. From the look on her face, Rio suspected the man had gotten a hell of a lot more familiar than he should have.

"Stupid asshole! Get your hairy palms off me!"

Rio's entire left side raged at what she was going through, almost as if the old burn scars were reacting to her predicament. *Danger*, his body seemed to howl.

Well, no fuckin' shit.

Cord better have his rifle in hand, loaded and aimed at Tito's heart. God, he hoped Cord was keeping calm enough to hit the bastard.

The element of surprise would only work in their favor once, but he had no doubt that if something didn't give soon, Cord was likely to detonate and start shooting. If Rio didn't beat him to it.

Diablo's hand clamped on Juliana's jaw and turned her head to the side. With a sinking stomach, Rio watched the man's pointed tongue lick straight up her cheek. "Don't call me names," he told her, licking down now. "Diablo doesn't like that."

A look of pure revulsion on her face, Juliana jerked at Diablo's hold. "You'll never get away with this, you fiend-fucker. Let me go!"

*Fiend-fucker?*

Tito spun the pistol in his hand, cool and collected once again now that Juliana was under his power. He took another two steps toward her. *Just a little closer*, puto cabron, Rio urged mentally.

"Where's your friend?" Tito demanded.

"In town," she lied, still straining within Diablo's arms. "Local pizza place doesn't deliver out here."

Tito raised his arm, the gun pointing at her menacingly. "Then why were you calling his name?"

*Oh hell.* Had Tito figured out there were two of them?

"Just giving my lungs a workout."

"I'd advise against any more smartass replies." Faster than Rio could blink, Tito raised his free hand and whacked her across the face.

Juliana cried out, her head flinging to the side. Diablo just laughed.

Anger flared in Rio's gut. *Goddammit!*

A bird trilled, the light sound filling the air, confirming what he needed to know. Cord was in place and ready to act, do whatever he had to. Ready to guard his home and their woman. Ready to take back his life.

Well, so was Rio. He shifted, tightening his grip on his pistol.

Tito fired another warning shot, one that flew just inches over Juliana's head.

"Fuck it, Tony! That was close. Aim at the *puta*, not me!"

Almost immediately, the bird chirped again, impatiently. Well, no shit, Sherlock. Did Cord think he was clipping his toenails?

"That's for driving my car too damn fast on this shitty backwoods drive like a damn *un campesino encima de un burro*." Tito complained. "*Que cochino!* It'll take hours to get the dirt off."

Rio breathed deep, absorbing every bit of stillness from the earth he could, and willed the younger man to exercise patience, to wait for the right moment. As long as Juliana stood between Tito and the house, Cord couldn't get a clear shot. If Rio could just draw Tito's attention away from Juliana, that's all it would take. All he needed to do was avoid getting himself—or Juliana—shot in the process.

"D—let her go. Check out the house." Diablo released Juliana but not until after licking the side of her neck.

She winced and the bastard only laughed again, walking backward one slow step at a time, keeping her in view.

"Diablo!" Tito reprimanded. "The house. Now, *puta*, why were you out in the woods?"

With their attention centered away from him, Rio darted to a nearby tree. Almost there...

Juliana smiled sweetly and Rio knew he was going to regret the next words out of her mouth. "I'm training for a marathon."

Damn woman!

Tito laughed evilly. "Funny bitch, aren't you? I warned you, but you've just made this even easier. *Una guapita como tu...* I was almost starting to doubt myself, but not any

longer..." He raised his hand again and Juliana ducked, throwing the wads of dirt in Tito's face.

Rio lifted his gun and stepped from behind the tree, returning Cord's whistle in the same instant.

A dark circle appeared in the center of Tito's forehead a split second before Rio heard the *boom* of Cord's rifle. When Diablo palmed his weapon, Rio aimed and fired at his shoulder, pure instinct guiding his motions. The big man howled and went down.

Juliana stumbled toward him. Rio shifted to the side and saw Diablo roll over and raise his pistol. He was aiming at Juliana's back!

"Get down!" Rio shouted at her, firing off two rounds that hit dead center in Diablo's chest. The man collapsed. Bloody gurgles erupted from his mouth then he went silent.

"Juliana!" Keeping his gun pointed downward but ready to use again if necessary, Rio opened his arms and she flew into him, knocking him backward a couple of steps.

Rio wasn't sure whether this was it or if Tito had another carload of his lackeys waiting at the end of the lane.

"You both all right?" Cord hollered from upstairs.

"Yeah." It came out a croak. Rio swallowed and tried again. "Yeah. Get down here, junior!"

Feeling his heart start to beat again, Rio gathered her sobbing body into his arms.

"It's over. It's okay." He stroked her reddened face where Tito had hit her and held her tight, unable to contain a tear or two of his own when he thought about how close he'd come to losing her. Forever this time. "Shhh. You did good, Jules...real good. Shhh..."

Cord was right. All that mattered was her love—any way he could get it. He didn't care that she loved Cord too, that she was sleeping with both of them. Forget his pride, he *couldn't* lose her.

Moments later, a somber-faced Cord walked outside, weapon still in hand. He stood at the door, staring at them a moment before he propped the rifle against the wall then came down off the porch. Without saying a word, he joined their embrace, hugging Juliana from behind, nuzzling his face into her neck.

Rio moved his hands from Juliana's back to Cord's shoulders, pulling him closer. Together they stood there.

No longer a trio but one.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Ah, Mr. Ramsey? Sheriff Larkin will be wantin' to speak with you next but for now, I'll be needin' to commandeer your rifle."

"My rifle?"

In a daze, his defenses the only thing keeping him numb, Cord's fingers flexed around cold metal. He hadn't let go since Rio brought up the possibility of more of the bastards coming along, never mind that the only thing to roar up the dirt drive in the past hour had been three sheriff's vehicles and one ambulance—all with lights blazing and sirens blaring. If there had been any more of Tito's men in the woods, they were long gone by now.

The thought turned him cold.

Leaning against the trunk of the big oak, Cord stared blindly at the scene playing out in his front yard. Uniformed deputies swarmed everywhere, taping off the area and covering the ground with little yellow markers while the local sheriff questioned a tearful Juli and Rio separately. A medical examiner knelt over Tito's sheet-covered body and Diablo was being loaded onto a stretcher. A stretcher it took three grown men to lift.

Dead. They were both dead.

"Mr. Ramsey? I said I'll need to take your rifle. Standard procedure in cases like this."

Cord cleared his throat, straightening. "You guys always make such a big deal out of self-defense?"

"We do when it's the Benitos. Got to cross our Ts, you know, this bein' such a big case and all. Across state lines and all that."

With a jerky nod, Cord unclenched his fingers and turned his rifle over to the deputy. His empty hands felt clammy, dirty. The edges of his vision blurred and a sick feeling erupted in him, dizzy and overwhelming. Cord couldn't contain the sudden nausea, the memories stampeding through his mind.

*POPPOPPOP! Insurgents coming in!*

No! He'd sworn he'd never kill again. Sworn it to God.

"You okay?"

Dead. They were both dead.

Dropping to his knees, he puked his guts out. Tossed up every last piece of lunch and the fear that went with it. *POPPOPPOP!*

"Hey, bud...Mr. Ramsey?"

"Cord...Cord?"

The deputy's voice was replaced with that of an angel's and the next thing Cord realized, Juli was crouched behind him, her hands stroking his shoulders. "Cord?"

He blinked and swallowed the most disgusting taste in the world as reality set back in. He'd done it for her. Had to.

Killed for the woman he loved. His stomach roiled once more but Cord pushed it down, knowing he'd do it all over again to protect his own.

"Cord?" Her fingers dug into his collarbone.

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and turned, buried his face in her chest and sobbed, sobbed because of the way her presence instantly banished the memories, sobbed because he'd almost lost her. Sobbed because he was sobbing and it shouldn't be him, the *man*, blubbing like a baby and chucking up chunks.

God help him, he'd barely been able to pick up a gun to save her. What if Rio hadn't been here? Hadn't told Cord what to do—*ordered* him, so that fear receded and instinct kicked in? What then?

He couldn't protect her on his own. Couldn't stand the thought of losing her either.

Fuck! That left only one option—an impossible one. Sharing her. Forever.

Taking a deep breath, inhaling that intoxicating perfume she'd taken to wearing, Cord pushed back. "Whatever you have on the bastards, Juli, hand it over. *Please*. End this now."

*End this, not us.*

She nodded, scraping her nails over his jaw, petting him. "I will, as soon as Tom arrives. I promise."

She'd promised. Cord tried to breathe easier but still couldn't.

Flashes of the past intertwined with the present until all he could see was a scary combination of blood and death and Juli, Juli who was still patting his cheek. Juli—alive. He'd saved her. He and Rio.

With effort, Cord focused on her beautiful scratched face, searching for her eyes amidst the mass of tangled hair, finding those soft baby blues he'd despaired of never seeing again. "Angel, I—" His throat closed up and he feared barfing again. "I..."

"Shhh. I'm here and I'm not leaving." Her arms dropped to his waist and went around him. She held tight, but he held tighter.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Juli opened the screen door, the ever-present squeak grated across already raw nerves. Blaming the innocent door for the irritation that flared to life, she slammed it shut as hard as she could then opened and rammed it shut again. Over and over until her arm throbbed and her shoulder ached, she banged the stupid, flimsy door into its

old frame, trying to beat away her frustration. The screen shook and shuddered, the wood creaked and moaned, but the damn thing wouldn't break.

Finally giving up, knowing she was one step away from the breaking point herself, Juli pushed open the fancy front door and crossed the threshold into the foyer, expecting the comforting house to welcome her with open arms and instead finding she'd walked into a smokestack.

Catching the stench of singed citrus and charred chicken that poisoned the air, seeing the haze of smoke that grew thicker with every shaky step she took toward the kitchen, she ran the rest of the way and shut the stove off with a vengeance. Three hours too late.

Coughing, she propped open the back door that the wind had sucked shut. The heavy smoke only mocked her. Needing to open the window above the sink, get a cross breeze going, she headed that direction but didn't get very far before the broken plate crunched under her shoes.

Reminding her – there couldn't be three.

And she was living in a dream world to think otherwise.

A totally senseless, mixed-up, pie-in-the-sky, broken-plate-on-the-floor dream, imagining that the three of them could find happiness together. She should know better. Dreams were for little girls who still believed. Believed in happily-ever-afters.

Juli had learned the hard way there was only one thing she could believe in and count on – herself.

She might have forgotten that in the excitement over learning Rio was alive, in the shock of being kidnapped, the amazement of meeting Cord and being trapped on his plantation and losing herself to his unique brand of gentle-rough loving.

But she hadn't lost her *entire* heart to him, she reminded herself. Just as she hadn't lost it to Rio.

Just as she hadn't lost her life to the Benitos.

But she'd come so close...

To all three.

It seemed as if every single piece of blackened chicken had lodged in her windpipe and Juli gulped twice, swallowing down the knot. Refusing to give in to any further silly emotion, she undid the window latch and pushed the glass up until a crisp breeze blew inside. She let the fresh evening air, sharper now since a cool front had blown in, wash over her, imagining that it also washed away every care in the world.

She wanted to forget how she'd stood in the yard for ages, shivering on the inside, refusing to let it show on the outside while she endured countless questions from countless law enforcement officers.

She wanted to forget the near kitchen fire from the food she'd left cooking. She wanted to forget how she felt when Tom had finally arrived and she handed over the



flash drive—guilty. Guilty about how her stubborn actions had brought danger onto Cord's land and to the men she loved.

Just the thought of everything that had happened—Diablo and Tito chasing her down, the absolute terror she'd felt, the combined horror and relief when Cord and Rio shot them—was enough to make her soul shudder, as if someone hadn't just walked over her grave but had done a dance on it.

But she was free now. Supposedly. She wasn't sure she'd ever feel completely safe from the Benitos' reach. Tito and his groping henchman of a brother might be dead, but what about other possible partners? Did he have other brothers? Some cousins from upstate New York no one knew about—yet? Crooked creeps who were just waiting for something like this to occur so they could move in and take over Tito's turf?

And what about all those dirty cops? Even now they could be ordering her a three-tiered strawberry-mocha cake with chocolate frosting and the words *We Owe You* calligraphied on top in white letters as a thank you.

Only instead of a fancy cake with nothing but flour, butter and too much sugar on the inside, maybe this one had a bomb in it, just waiting for when an unsuspecting Juli cut into it—in order to offer a piece to both of the men that had pieces of her heart—and set off the detonation mechanism, blowing all three of them up into millions and billions of pieces, all because she wouldn't let it go—her unending quest for justice.

And as her last few thoughts registered, Juli finally straightened and turned from the window, muttering, "When did I go completely off the deep end?"

It had to be the subconscious levels of constant fear she'd lived with ever since finding out that first Walt then Johnson had been murdered, and she truly was playing with the big guys. She thought she'd known all about fear, all about loss, but after the events of this afternoon—dodging Tito's bullets, struggling within Diablo's stinky arms, suffering his *tongue*—Juli had an entirely new appreciation of pure, unadulterated fear. Until confronting it, she hadn't a clue.

Nor had she realized she'd stopped living, not until she'd started again.

She couldn't, *wouldn't* go back to being dead inside. To chasing ghosts. She was done risking everything to justify the senseless deaths of her parents and college boyfriend. She was done trying to please ratings-hungry bosses.

From now on, Juli was going to please herself. Live her own life, her own way. Starting just as soon she figured out what that was...

She flicked her head, trying to swing rebellious hair over her shoulder to no avail. Giving up, she retied the scrunchie that wouldn't stay put to save her life.

Hair still a disaster.

Dinner burnt to a crisp. Another disaster.

Kitchen not any better.

Life, dare she say it? *Disaster*.

God. Her skin still crawled. She'd never forget how Diablo—

Oh yes she would!

*Juli Reed, you're made of sterner stuff than this!* Taking action, she dunked a clean rag in the ever-present bowl of water. Bending over, Juli splashed water on her face, scrubbing away the taint of Diablo's tongue.

A nearby dishtowel was quickly put to use drying her cheek *and* for more scrubbing. Frazzled, wondering if she'd ever feel like herself again, Juli swung around and rested against the counter.

Seeking the solace Willow Creek always provided, her gaze automatically stared out the screen door into the rapidly approaching night. Long shadows encompassed the outbuildings and the fields beyond. So beautiful, so much like home.

She felt as if she belonged here, nowhere else. *With* no one else.

Her heart struggled to believe what her mind refused to accept. She loved Rio and Cord, felt compelled to be with them both. So what now?

And think of the devils, she watched them exit one of the barns. After fully debriefing Tom, who'd been the last official to remain and who only left after repeated assurances that they could take care of themselves from here on out, Rio and Cord had told her they'd be right in, after a quick detour to tidy up what they'd been in the middle of earlier. Well, here they were, invading her space, along with her thoughts.

Right on cue, both men pounded up the steps.

"Leave the door open," she called out, pushing away from the counter, knowing she still had a huge mess to clean—both the kitchen and her entire life—and reluctant to do either. "The house needs to air out."

Cord stepped inside, a scruffy blond tower of strength. If she hadn't known he'd been emptying his stomach just hours before, shaking from the aftermath of dealing with the Benitos and handling a gun again, Juli would've simply admired how good he looked. Now not even his "*Ay caramba*, it smells in here" could take away from the pride she felt, knowing he'd faced his demons in order to save her.

"*Ay caramba?*" she heard Rio question with a chuckle. "What are you, Bart Simpson?"

Then he stomped in, scraping the dirt off his shoes. Rio's nose wrinkled at the scent and his eyes squinted at the leftover smoke still hazing the place. "What happened, *ángelita*, did you decide saving your life only warranted serving volcanic ash tonight?"

Cord crossed his arms and surveyed the steamed-out mess on the stove. He winked at Juli but directed his comment to Rio. "Guess we need to find us a woman who knows how to cook dinner without almost burnin' the place down."

Rio walked around to the other side of the kitchen. He nodded at the broken dish in front of Juli's feet. "I'm thinking we need a woman who knows how to clean house."

"Guess you do," she said with a put-on smile, noticing in some rational part of her brain how very ordinary, even normal their comments sounded, which was so

completely *abnormal* that she spoke without thinking. "Well, I guess I just need to find a real man who can satisfy me by himself."

Her comment hung in the air. "Oh God. Did I just say that out loud? I didn't." She couldn't have. Could she? "Forget it. I'm sorry. Must be the stress. Oh God. I'm sorry."

Since each of them stood on either side of the kitchen and in order to escape she'd have to rush by one of them, Juli instead sunk to her knees and frantically began to gather the broken dishware.

"Leave it 'til morning, Juliana," Rio said just as his booted feet came into view.

She ignored him and reached for the farthest piece.

"Leave it." He barked the command and her head jerked upward. He stared down at her with soulful eyes—eyes that craved her, needed her in every way she had to give. "The kitchen'll keep. Come on, relax with me."

He didn't look very relaxed. He looked ready to pounce. It was obvious Rio wanted her. She wanted him too. Wanted to find oblivion in his arms and body. Needed to feel the love he had to give. But she needed Cord just as much.

"No chance of that—relaxing. I won't be sleeping tonight anyway." Her voice was weak. She glanced at Cord, knowing what she'd find in his gaze—desire. *Why* couldn't they all be happy? "Unless..."

She bit her tongue.

Picking up the trash can, Cord came over and set it beside her. "Unless what?"

She dumped the pieces inside and stood, feeling cornered. Each man was so big, standing so close to her. It was a struggle to not reach out and haul them both closer. God, she needed to be held. "I—" *There couldn't be three.* "Nothing."

"Come on, darlin'. I can tell you have more to say."

She steeled herself against Cord's cajoling tone. "I said *nothing*."

"Juliana?"

Refusing to acknowledge what she heard in Rio's voice, she pivoted in place and rushed over to the sink. "God. Can't you *men* just leave me alone? I don't need you! Either of you."

She proceeded to turn on the cold tap, squirt liquid soap from the pump into her palm and wash her hands with more precision and care than she'd ever done a task in her life, hoping against hope that neither one of them would ever leave her alone again, despite her claim to the contrary.

Seconds passed. Maybe minutes. Behind her, the silence remained thick. In front of her, clean hands squeaked from the thorough washing.

Just as she reached for the soap a third time, Rio came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, hugging her to him. He rested his chin on her shoulder and leaned forward to turn off the running water. "You all right, *ángelita*?"

Tears threatened for about the umpteenth time that day. That month. "What do you think?"

"I think you do. After all that happened today, *I* think you need us both, but I asked you, didn't I, so why don't *you* tell me?"

His unmistakable spicy scent surrounded her and she couldn't help but snuggle backward into his chest and tilt her head toward his. When she spoke again, her lips felt swollen, her throat tight. "No. No, I'm not all right. Not even close. They could have killed me," she said tremulously. "Could've killed all of us."

"Try not to think about it. It's over. You're safe." Nuzzling his lips along her neck, he spoke loud enough for Cord to hear. "I imagine you'll want to head back home now."

"Home? *Now?*" Her insides froze at the thought. Just hours ago she'd been running away, determined to leave and return to her old life. But now...

Being on the plantation had changed her. She didn't want the same things, didn't look at the world the same way.

"Now that Tito's dead," Rio clarified.

"I, uh..." Juli straightened and picked the dishtowel off the counter, drying her hands and trying to play it cool while inside her mind was churning. Why was it she felt like bawling at the thought of returning to her old existence, of ever leaving Rio's embrace? Of never having Cord's again? Stalling, she asked, "What about the rest of his family? The entire Benito gang?"

Rio's grip loosened and he shifted, still holding her. Juli bit her lip, hating herself for sounding weak but still needing an answer. "Until they're all rounded up, aren't I still in danger?"

Cord stepped to the counter and took the towel from her restless fingers, tugging her to face him. Rio accommodated the effort by taking a half step to the left, turning with her. Cord squeezed her hands. "Maybe you should stay."

Juli nodded, felt the back of her head bump against Rio's chest, noticed how she no longer worried about the future, not really. Inside, she was more concerned with her present. "I'm not sure I want to return to DC. Not sure I ever want to go back." *Not sure I want to leave here.*

In a corner of her mind, she wondered if she was standing in the right man's arms. Or whether she was looking in the right man's eyes. How did she know?

Why did it feel as if *both* men were so very right?

That either of them could give her what she'd craved since watching that fateful newscast when one unappreciative teenager was forced to grow up overnight and learned too late to appreciate what she no longer had — *security*.

Security. Something she could have with either man if she didn't miss her guess.

Security and love and a sense of place, even peace, but would it ever be enough? Could she truly be happy—for the long term—with either one of them...with only *one* of them?

Juli thought she could, she really did, but some part of her would always wonder *what if*, always regret it if she didn't at least try for more, try for what she really wanted—which was both of them. Together.

So for once in her life, she traded known security for an unknown gamble.

There was only one way to tell, one way to set her mind at ease. She had to go for it. And for a girl who prized herself on keeping her heart secure, she was about to take the biggest risk of her life.

"Juliana?" Rio pressed, loving the feel of her in his arms, but impatient for her response. "What is it you don't want to go back to? The location or your life there?"

Instead of answering him, Juliana snaked her hand behind her body and cupped the bulge in his pants. She held him firmly, turning around so that her soft breasts arched high against his chest.

"Rio," she whispered his name, her breathy voice at odds with her firm caress. Determinedly, she stroked his cock through his jeans.

His flesh responded quickly, turned to steel, his erection pushing against his fly, reaching for more. She moaned and stroked him harder and he forgot all about demanding an answer about her and DC. His curiosity about whether she was running away from what they'd found here or avoiding her old life in exchange for something new could be satisfied later. For now he only murmured, "What is it, baby?" responding to the urgency of her touch.

Juliana squirmed against his body and he saw her free hand dart out, snagging the sleeve of Cord's shirt, which she gave a little tug.

"Cord." She practically hummed his name, pulling him closer.

Taking her by the chin, Rio gazed into her eyes. They were glassy, bright with desire. *Jesus*. She really wanted this. Wanted them both.

He looked at Cord, who'd dug his feet in and refused to become part of their embrace despite Juliana's urging. A grim smile tugged at Rio's lips when he saw how she'd wound her fingers in Cord's shirt. He still felt her other hand grazing over every inch of his eager cock.

Rio flicked his glance back at Juliana then up at Cord, not surprised to see the same emotion, the same need shining in his narrowed eyes, accompanied by surprise. Acceptance.

"I can leave," Cord drawled, his hand lifted toward Juliana's hair but not touching. "Or I can stay. It's up to you."

Knowing that Cord had looked to him, almost as if asking permission, helped Rio swallow his own pride and reach for what he'd been thinking of for weeks. It wasn't up

to him, no matter what Cord thought. It all came down to Juliana. Rio would do whatever she wanted, whatever she needed.

Not that he'd mind. Somehow, whether in the past few minutes or the past few days, he'd abandoned senseless judging. Just as Cord didn't mind sharing Juliana with him, Rio realized neither did he mind sharing her with Cord. In fact, as he played through various scenarios in his mind, he realized the idea turned him on. *Muchísimo*.

"Juliana?" Still holding her chin, he tilted her head back so he could look clearly at her every feature. A stubborn, determined, beautiful woman stared back, capped off with the wildest mane of hair he'd ever seen. "Are you sure about this? After the way you've pitted the two of us against each other..." Rio heard Cord grunt in agreement and flashed him a look, one full of pure male bonding. "There won't be any going back after we start this. If you change your mind—"

"I won't." She squeezed his cock, her nails scraping him through the denim. "Please, Rio."

Swooping his mouth down on hers, he hauled her against him and swung her around to Cord. Rio couldn't kiss her hard enough, fast enough, couldn't express every emotion boiling inside him—they all bubbled up through his body, lending a fierceness to his actions that hadn't been there the previous times they'd kissed...

The fear that gripped him earlier when Tito was shooting at her, seeing Diablo feeling her up and dragging her away, unsure if they'd all get out of this alive.

The shame he'd lived with for years after failing her father—failing her.

The self-consciousness of his scars, of being seen naked by another man. Hell, of being intimately exposed—on every level, physical and emotional—in front of another man.

The excited nervousness of having his first threesome—and having the outcome mean so much... The fear of not being enough for Juliana, of never being enough, coupled with the knowledge and relief that maybe, along with Cord, things would be just right. That together, the two of them were exactly what Juliana needed, all she'd ever want.

So he applied himself to this kiss, making sure it was everything it could be—using his lips and tongue on her mouth, his hands on her back then her breasts, putting his entire self into it—body, heart and soul.

He wanted to devour as much of her as he could. The way he felt about Juliana, Rio knew he didn't want this to be a one-time fling. He'd finally come to realize he wanted the exact same thing that Juliana—and Cord—wanted, what they'd been flaunting in front of him practically since day one. His body had been eager to join in but his mind had held back—protesting—until this afternoon.

Maybe he'd been a closet voyeur his entire life and hadn't known it. Maybe it just took a special woman to connect and bind two very different men, but seeing Diablo pawing Juliana, hearing the bullets blast from Tito's handgun, Rio's mind had finally

come to the conclusion his heart had long since reached—he loved Juliana with everything in him and would do whatever it took to make her his, to make her happy.

Starting now.

A thrill shot through Cord, watching Rio kiss Juli. From his up-close vantage point, he could see and hear every nuance of their heated exchange. Could almost taste the kiss he wasn't yet participating in.

His cock rejoiced.

It was really going to happen then. He was going to share his woman with another man, find his pleasure inside her body while she also pleased another, and instead of feeling awkward or jealous or conflicted, Cord couldn't wait to get started.

After tracing his fingers down her spine while watching their kiss become more heated, Cord appointed himself the task of stripping off Juli's clothing. He reached around her torso, wedged his fingers between the kissing couple and unzipped the hooded sweatshirt she wore, pausing when he reached the bottom and his knuckles brushed against the other man's erection.

That's a new experience, Cord thought, almost chuckling, but too damn horny at the notion of what they were all about to do to laugh outright. He shrugged the sweatshirt from her shoulders, surprised to find she wasn't naked underneath. When had she started wearing a bra?

Unhooking the lacy contraption, he slid it down her arms and brought it to his nose, breathing in her personal scent, reminding himself to take his time and not rush. Moving with exaggerated slowness, he tossed the bra behind him and went for the waistband on her pants.

"Lift her," he grated out, and his voice sounded raspy to his ears. He swallowed, licked his lips and tried again. "Lift her feet."

A shift, a groan, and Rio complied, pinning Juli's bare torso against his chest and bringing her feet off the floor. She was wearing a pair of stretchy, athletic pants. Grinning to himself, Cord decided to forgo the tie at the elasticized waistband. He grabbed the loose fabric at her thighs and tugged, sliding the fitted band over her hips a little farther with each jerk of his arms. The thin strap of her panties slid free, lopsided, just as the pants fell around her ankles, trapped by the new shoes Rio had bought her.

"Sure do like these pinkish panties you're wearin'," he breathed over her ass. "Reminds me of a certain color of paint. They surely do." Cord smacked his lips at the agonized sound of arousal that burst from Rio and crouched to finish his job.

He unzipped one pant leg at the ankle and swept it free but became too distracted by the sight of her—the fragrance of her arousal—to finish the job. He covered the reddened skin of her hips with his hands, cursing the calluses from so many recent hours of chopping wood that kept him from feeling every nuance beneath but appreciating the sight all the more when Rio gripped one satin-covered butt cheek with

his dark-skinned hand, pulling Juli tighter against his groin and causing her to groan in response.

Becoming more excited by the second, Cord continued caressing her body, trailing his fingers over every curve in front of him then he kissed a path up her spine, which included darting off on several side journeys as he mapped the adorable freckles that had appeared on her shoulders with his lips. Standing, he found himself kissing the back of her neck, rubbing against her ass with his still-clothed cock, noticing how Rio moved his hand, giving Cord full access. He thrust against her a time or two then pulled back to admire the view once again.

Her untamed hair tumbled from the confining band with one flick of his wrist. Cord couldn't figure out why she tried so hard to force it into order. It was free, wild. Just like Juli and his love for her. He gathered the luscious strands and pulled, bringing another groan from her lips. Holding the mass to the side, Cord placed a lingering kiss to her nape.

He put everything he had in the way he licked and sucked her neck, loving the low squeal she made when he tongued her flesh.

She was beautiful – beautiful and all his.

Correction, all *theirs*.

Had someone told him he was going to love sharing a woman with another man, he'd have told them they belonged on a funny farm. But truth was, he did love it. Maybe he was the crazy one, but the last thing he wanted was to see Juli in pain, torn between him and Rio. She couldn't help that she loved them both, couldn't fight her feelings. And she shouldn't have to. Hell, he didn't *want* her to.

Especially not when the sight of Rio kissing her senseless turned him on enough that his dick was threatening to riot right out of his pants.

He kissed up the side of her neck and slid his hands over her panty-covered ass, kneading the lush flesh. Leaning forward, he traced one thumb along the satin crevice between her cheeks, pushing the silky fabric into her crack, feeling her heat, the humidity that tempted his fingers to push farther, delve deeper. She moaned and arched her butt toward him then wrapped her legs around Rio's waist, riding the other man's cock while spreading her ass cheeks wide for his exploration.

"Hey, darlin'," Cord whispered, swiping his fingers along the seam, pressing against her anus, feeling the tiny bud open and close through the damp satin. "Do you like the thought of having me inside you – *here*?" he pushed deeper, tauntingly. "Are you ready for me to fuck this beautiful tight hole while Rio drills your pussy? Are you?"

She moaned again and ground herself between them both. Rio pulled back, away from Juli's attacking mouth and shot a look at Cord. "Watch how you talk to her, man. She's still a lady."

But Cord saw that the words had appealed to Rio as well. He grinned. "She likes it."



Holding Rio's gaze, Cord slid one hand inside the damp satin and fingered her anus directly. She flinched within Rio's hold then squirmed backward against his touch.

"Our little lady likes it when I talk dirty to her. Watch..." He pushed his finger inside the tight ring up to the first knuckle and leaned over her shoulder so he was speaking directly into her ear as she shuddered from his touch. "You've been dreaming of this, haven't you? Dreaming since that first night when we fucked in the bathtub—"

"Bathtub?"

Rio's strangled query reached Cord's ears and he smiled even more. God, how had he gotten so lucky?

"Dreaming of having us both inside your body, our cocks reachin' deep inside your cunt and ass at the same time?" But instead of pushing his finger deeper, he swirled it around the edges of her rectum and pulled free, sliding a different digit straight down the hot crevice until dipping inside her pussy.

Juli went wild, biting Rio's neck and squealing as Cord felt her vaginal muscles beg for more.

"Does this turn you on, darlin'?" He reached high and fingered her clit for just a second before withdrawing his hand altogether. "Does it?"

"God yes." Breaking away from Rio's neck, she panted her answer, thrusting her pelvis faster between the other man's cock and his absent fingers. "Hurry! Give me more. Now!"

Refusing to give in to her demands, Cord only pressed his body against her back and butt. "Do you want me to take you like I did in the kitchen? Or in the barn? Do you want it hard and fast this time? Or slow and tender? Soft? Or rough?"

"*Rough?*" Another groaned one-word question from Rio. Then, "Kitchen? Barn?"

Cord nodded. "In addition to dirty talk, our Juli likes it rough sometimes, don't you, baby? Squeeze her breasts," he ordered Rio then watched as Juli pressed into the other man's touch. "Harder. Pinch her harder. She won't break."

"Jesus, I have a lot of catching up to do." Rio's face looked pained, but Cord had never seen him so relaxed and in the moment, as though he were no longer beating himself up over the past. "Although why I'm surprised, I have no clue, given that all three of us are still standing in this stinking kitchen. For the record, just *how many* places have the two of you gone at it?"

*And how soon can we all do it there again?* Cord heard the unspoken question. Still rubbing his chest against her back but refusing to touch her anywhere else, Cord stretched, reaching both arms toward the ceiling. "Oh, here and there," he answered Rio as casually as he could when his cock had turned to a fifteen-pound column of granite in his jeans, "but as long as Juli's agreeable, I'm sure we can show you."

"Oh yeah. But later," she whimpered, sounding as if she were truly in pain. "Both of you, stop talking and fuck me now. Please!"

"Oh no." Rio's fingers slid from her breasts and threaded her hair, forcing her to face him. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right, aren't we, junior? No hurrying allowed, *ángelita*."

"That's right, *Senior* Tarin. *Sí, sí*," Cord said in his best imitation of a subservient employee, knowing that he'd make Rio pay for the continued *junior* digs the next time they chopped wood. There was a dull axe just waiting inside the barn and it had Rio's name written all over it. "Junior, my ass," he said in his regular voice, though it was hoarse from desire. "I plan on taking my own sweet time and lasting *all through the night*. Can you say the same, old man?"

"Damn straight. Now I think we have a woman to plug." Rio gave a rough bark of laughter. "It sounds better when you do it. Plug, plunder, poke." He hefted Juli closer. "We're gonna do it all, baby."

"And pleasure," Cord vowed, ripping the thin strap of her panties with both hands, loving how primitive he felt when he heard the material give way. He threw the scrap to the floor and held her thighs wide when she would have dropped her legs and closed them. "And no resisting, either." He smacked her bottom sharply. "After the dance you've led both of us on, we're in charge tonight, me and Rio. Is it that understood, Juli darlin'?"

And he slapped her ass again, just for the hell of it.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Juli cried out at the gently stinging blows, arching against Rio while licking along his neck. He tasted spicy and salty, all male. She hugged her legs around his waist and sucked his skin harder. Cord delivered a third sharp smack to her ass. "Answer me, woman!"

"Yes," she gasped, clueless. What had he asked?

"That means no climaxing until *we* decide the time's right," Rio added. "Got that?"

The nails of Cord's fingers ran over the inflamed flesh of her butt and thighs, demanding an answer. As if she would even consider saying no to either one—she'd do anything, *anything*, to be taken by both of them at once. She was giving herself to them, fully, to do with as they pleased. And she couldn't be more thrilled by the prospect.

"I promise," she swore, still licking whatever skin of Rio's neck and collarbone was within kissing distance, anticipating the next slap from Cord with breathless abandon. "Whatever you say. Won't come, promise." Though she doubted she could hold out much longer against the flood of desire building in her pussy, slicking her thighs.

Her body was primed, but in her mind she never wanted this to end. It was impossible. Impossible but happening. She pushed Rio's shirt completely out of the way and bit down on his shoulder. He moaned but didn't tell her to stop. She sucked harder on his flesh and bucked her hips within his grasp, trying to get more friction on her clit. Trying to ask Cord to spank her again.

"Put her down," Cord commanded. "Make her stand up on her own."

"You heard the man." Rio shifted and slowly lowered her to the floor. Unsteady feet touched the kitchen rug, her shoes skidding over broken china.

Why was she wearing her pants around only one ankle? *Who cared?* As long as her pussy was free, Juli was a happy girl. Happy? Try ecstatic!

Standing on trembling legs, her heart thumping as if she were about to skydive, Juli unbuttoned Rio's shirt and contemplated his glorious, dark Latino chest. Scarred on one side, lightly furred on the other, she ran her palms over his body and realized how very lucky she was to be alive.

For once, she wasn't trying to forget her past, trying to stifle the pain and loss. Instead, she *wanted* to remember every single moment, every touch and feeling of this experience. The way the wind whistled through the crack in the window above the sink, the way the sun had set, leaving them in the deepening twilight, the way she stood there, nearly naked, waiting for two men who loved her to *love* her.

It was everything. Everything she'd dreamed of since the moment Cord had taken her in the barn and she'd realized she still wanted Rio. At the same time.

Behind her, Cord spread her shaking legs and crouched between them, his body forcing hers to open wider. She felt his hot breath on her thighs, on the back of her knees.

Rio's hands glided down her torso as he crouched to join Cord. Both men placed their fingers on her swollen, soaked pussy and opened her to their explorations. Two tongues delved deep, Cord's stroking from her tailbone straight down the seam of her ass, and lower...until reaching the apex of her thighs, while Rio exposed her clit and flicked his tongue over it.

She groaned at the sensations, but more at the sight. At the sight of Rio centered between her legs, looking up at her as he nuzzled her flesh with his lips and sucked the tiny bud into his mouth, setting her aflame. She forked her fingers through his short hair and held on then turned to look over her shoulder, seeing and feeling Cord as he ate at her from behind, his wide tongue plunging roughly in her pussy, his nose nudging her anus.

She rocked her pelvis between their attentions and tried to stifle the urge to hum the theme from "Miss America". Even without the evening gown, red roses and tiara, Juli felt like the most cherished woman on earth. What the hell. She hummed an unrecognizable tune but one that had her hips bucking faster, riding both their mouths.

"Remember," Rio tilted his head back enough to murmur, "hold on to your orgasm. After all the ones I've witnessed from afar, I don't want you peaking until I say you're ready." Then he dove back between her legs, attacking her pussy with abandon.

Her knees were putty, her mind in a fog. She tugged on Rio's hair, finally caught a grip on the top of his ears and tried to brace herself against the waves of pleasure slamming through her body.

Don't come! *Don't come?*

How the hell was she supposed to resist?

The muscles in her thighs tightened. Her heart rate sped up. "Oh God, please..."

Cord surfaced, his fingers squeezing her backside roughly. "Don't climax," he echoed. "Don't, Juli, not yet. You're not ready yet."

Ready? Uh...she begged to differ! She cried out, her entire body vibrating.

Without warning, Cord bit one side of her butt then replaced his mouth with his hand, sliding several fingers from her pussy straight up her crack to her anus. Every nerve ending celebrated in response. He slid one finger fully into her asshole, and she hummed louder with satisfaction, with anticipation.

Rio continued to torture her clit, drawing it into his mouth then releasing. Coaxing the bud to tighten, lashing it with his tongue until it relaxed. Then doing it all over again.

Cord continued plunging his finger deep, forcing her to open for him while he teased the tight ring with his other hand, causing her entire rectum to clench around his finger, trying to bring it deeper, trying to push it out, all the while begging for more.

Which he gave, inserting another finger in her anus then another, massaging her sensitive tunnel until her bottom was wide open and ready to take his cock.

Juli could hardly breathe. Her mind was a jumble. Desire ruled, wiping her free of restraint or control. Cord hummed his own song against her thighs, Rio's tongue flicked over her clit. She *had* to come. Had to or risk losing consciousness. And there was no way she was going to miss a second of this experience.

Taking one deep breath, praying for a modicum of power over her body—a body that felt powerless to resist the plunge it was hurtling toward—Juli allowed herself to let go and spin into a whirlwind orgasm. Her loins constricted and released rapidly, her pussy went into convulsions and she came over Rio's face. Squeezed tight against Cord's wonderful invasion.

A loud moan escaped from her throat and Juli felt her heartbeat slow even as the contractions in her loins increased.

Suddenly Cord's fingers slid free. "She orgasmed," he growled in disappointment.

Rio *tut-tutted* his disapproval. "And she was told not to. Several times in fact. It appears the *señorita* does not know how to listen."

So now they were ganging up on her?

How unfair! She could barely stand, much less stand up for herself!

But it appeared Rio wasn't too disappointed because his mouth returned between her legs, his teeth pulling gently at her clit, punishing her with pleasure. His tongue darted in and out, thrumming against her electrified nerves.

"Juliana," he whispered, his breath hot against her pussy. "You are such a naughty girl. Now just what are we supposed to do about that?"

His fingers were like feathers dancing over her skin as he moved them up her thighs, over her hips, along her back. Standing before her, he seized her by the chin.

His eyes devoured hers, dark and needy. There was a curl to his lips, an irony. "I think Cord's right. *Voy a chingarte hasta que no puedes parar*. And I'm going to enjoy every second of it."

"What?" she breathed. "What did you say?"

"I'm going to fuck your body until you can no longer stand."

Juli sucked in a sharp breath, shocked as he kissed her fully, stroking his tongue along hers, smashing her mouth and sharing her taste. She would have fallen to the floor in a puddle of lust if not for Cord's hands holding her flaming backside, reminding her of how much she'd enjoyed him spanking her ass, how she wanted him to do it again.

Rio pulled away, glanced at Cord. "The kitchen isn't the place for this. Not anymore."

"To the bedroom!" Whipping her around, Cord bent and lifted her over his shoulder.

"Hold up," Rio ordered. "I need to finish what junior started."

Surprised, Juli let lose a squeal as Rio grabbed her shoes, pulled them free and dropped them to the floor. *Thump, thump*, they landed. *Whoosh*, both her socks followed and just as quickly he tugged the remaining pant leg over her ankle. "Now you may continue." His voice was harsh. "And get a move on."

"Aye, aye, my good man." Cord hefted her more securely, wedging one hand between her legs and ass up, she was carried through the dining and living rooms, the foyer and up the stairs.

Rio ascended ahead of them, his boots loud on the wooden steps. By the time they reached her room—the bedroom she'd taken to *sleeping* solo in since the cornflake incident, leaving the men to duke out their own sleeping arrangements—Rio was sitting on the edge of the bed, his shirt completely off, buttons undone on his jeans.

Dark hair peeked out from beneath the pale waistband of his boxers. Delish.

She expected to be unloaded onto the bed, but instead Cord gave her a whirl, turned her over and dumped her face down across Rio's knees. She cried out, rearing up, but Cord's large palms pinned her in place. Before she knew it, Rio's fingers had anchored into her pussy, delving deep. "I do believe she's owed some punishment."

"Agreed." Cord knelt on the floor beside them.

Juli thought about protesting, but decided the idea of enduring their joint punishment was too appealing to resist, so she ordered her muscles to relax and was just settling across Rio's upper legs when Cord removed one of the hands holding her down and smacked her left cheek then her right. "She has a great ass, doesn't she?"

"Mmm." Rio's hand fell softly on her bottom, kneading. "Sure does."

She rolled closer to Rio, hoping he'd continue his tender attentions, wondering if she should direct where they went... But then his fingers withdrew from between her legs and began massaging her other cheek. She couldn't decide if she'd rather him continue rubbing her ass or maybe her back, or better yet, her inner thighs. Maybe her breasts—

Her thoughts were derailed when Rio's palms rose and fell across her hot buttocks. First one then the other, as Cord's smacks moved lower onto the backs of her thighs, loud cracks ringing through the room.

Being spanked by *one* man was one thing, but by *two*? "Hey!"

"You complaining, darlin'?" Cord suddenly stopped.

Rio stilled as well and Juli felt the silence more than heard it. Her butt flamed, blood rushing through the lower half of her body, swarming in her loins. "Heck no, but I didn't—"

And they were back, four hands delivering stinging, seductive blows on her already heated flesh. She moaned, contemplating another protest when one of Rio's hands left her ass and appeared at the side of her mouth. Juli turned her head toward him and sucked a finger straight inside. She tasted herself all over him and started licking.

But three hands continued to supply arousing stimulation.

Then the slaps suddenly eased and one hand found its way to her nipple where it peeked out over Rio's leg. A graze of fingertips and nothing else. She wiggled, hoping the fingertips would return. Nothing. Her breast practically cried out at the lack, but the touch wasn't repeated. Whose had it been?

"More!" She'd been reduced to begging. Somehow, secure in their love, in her position between them, she didn't really mind. Biting down with her teeth to hold him in place, she spoke around Rio's finger. "More please! Now dammit."

She was rewarded with a firmer touch—a fingernail across her breast then a pinch of her nipple. A moan—hers. And more slaps to her buttocks, each followed by a rough massage of the skin beneath. Her entire body hummed now, but she'd gone silent.

It might have to do with the sheer joy resonating between her stimulated nipples and her ass from their seductive assault. Might have to do with how she'd identified Rio's supple fingers at her breast, Cord's work-roughened hands on her bottom and thighs...

"Please..." She suctioned Rio's finger and lifted her backside higher into Cord's hands, panting with her need to climax again.

Overhead, she heard Cord clear his throat. "Yeah, this is definitely one of the most tempting asses I've ever come across."

Juli smiled at the double entendre, unsure whether it was intentional or not, but she kept her attention focused on Rio's finger, intent on driving him as wild as he'd made her.

"Do you want to fuck her in it?" Cord continued, slowing his smacks to lightly trail several fingers up the seam of her crack, barely making contact. After the spanking, the gossamer touch felt like butterfly wings skating over her skin. Her pussy clenched, so very ready. So empty. "Or should I?"

"I haven't taken her in this sweet little hole yet," Rio answered with a hitch to his voice, and she could just imagine the expression on his face as he looked down at her sprawled across his lap, ass up and flushed with desire. She tugged his finger farther into her mouth and sucked.

"Mmm. But I'd love to," Rio continued. "If she's agreeable, that is. If she's ready?" He accompanied the question with a light pinch to her nipple, a light pinch that quickly grew hard when she failed to respond. "Maybe even if she isn't."

Juli moaned and nodded her assent, feeling Cord's fingers dip inside the slit between her legs, edge along her labia then drag back upward, over the crevice of her ass, spreading moisture over everything that hadn't already been made slick by her cream.

Could she be any more agreeable?

"After all," Rio said, rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, making her gasp, "I've been in her mouth and pussy, come in both, but it hasn't been nearly enough." He muttered something in Spanish then said again, "Not nearly enough."

"I can't wait to watch her take your cock," Cord said, his fingers going on that damnable journey again, tracing over the center seam of her ass, circling her cunt without going inside—damn him—then drawing wet, meandering circles over her inner thighs. "Anywhere you wanna give it to her."

If her lips and tongue hadn't been so busy, she'd tell them what she thought of their high-handed discussion, talking about her as if she weren't situated directly between them, hearing every exchange. As it was, Rio's fingers on her breasts, Cord's between her legs—the spanking!—alone, they were each enough to drive her over the edge, but their conversation was slicing through her sanity. Her anus puckered at the thought of Rio burying himself deep inside it. Her very soul rejoiced at the way they were sharing her.

If they kept it up, she was going to come all over again. How would they "punish" her then?

God. They were driving her horny insane. Did they have any idea how badly she wanted their cocks rubbing over her body? Filling her? How close she was to passing out?

Probably. The bastards.

Rio's seductive torture around her nipple turned more forceful. His nails grated across her entire breast. She felt the muscles in his legs tense. "I think she's had enough punishment for one night," he said with a single unexpected slap to her rear.

She whimpered, squirming, ready to take some control herself and no longer simply be pliant between them. Oh, but it felt so good, so bad. Maybe she wasn't quite ready to move yet after all...

"You up for the next step?" Cord asked Rio.

"Any more and I'll go off before we get her in place."

"Patience, old man." Cord smacked her bottom one last time. "Up," he commanded.

On shaky legs, she rose. Rio steadied her, looking anything but old the way those dark, sexy eyes bore into hers, telling her without words how much she meant to him. She smiled back with lips that quivered, still remembering how his flesh tasted.

Gathering her hair in his hands, Cord kissed her neck, across her shoulders until reaching her cheek. "How about you? Ready, darlin', for the lovin' of your life?"

"And you think you're gonna give it to me?" Juli surprised herself by shooting back, even though her legs barely held her upright. She thrummed from her head to her toes. Nipples tingled, ass burned...pussy ached. Her throat muscles must be the only thing in between that could still function. That and her heart. "I've never been more ready for anything," she told him quietly, turning serious, nudging Cord's cheek with her own. She stared at Rio. "Ever."



"Good." Cord planted one last nibbling kiss to her ear then stepped away, dropping her hair down her back. The out-of-control strands brushed over her sensitized skin and her entire body vibrated.

Near the foot of the bed, Cord assumed a military-precise stance. "Take off my clothes, Juli. With your eyes closed."

"What do you mean *with my eyes closed*? I want to see —"

"Juliana." Coming to his feet, Rio silenced her. "You agreed to obey —"

"Obey? What —"

"Downstairs. When you agreed that we're in charge."

They were right. Hmmm. Thinking of the possibilities, both now and in the future, Juli decided that rather than argue, she'd close her eyes. Which she did, smiling serenely at them both, even while her insides were churning like a volcano.

"Good girl." Cord's praise made her stand taller. "Now come closer and undress me."

Arms outstretched, Juli stepped forward and encountered his chest. Her hands shook as she guided them lower and unbuttoned his jeans then tugged at his t-shirt. With sight gone, her other senses jumped to the forefront. She heard his ragged breathing, felt the heated air from his exhalations wisp across on her face, loved smoothing the soft knit of his shirt beneath her fingertips. Loved the hot, hard skin more when she slipped her hands beneath the fabric and lifted the shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

She knew Rio had shifted his stance when she heard the floor creak to her right. The hair on the back of her neck rose as she sensed him walk around to her other side and stand nearby. No one spoke. Not a word.

Eyes pressed tightly shut, Juli breathed deep, inhaling the essence of both men and inadvertently dug her nails into Cord's pecs, only realizing it when he gasped. But no complaint issued forth. She scraped her nails lower and reached his jeans then quickly found the fly. Edging the button free, she pulled the zipper down and noticed how lightheaded she was feeling.

Crickets chirped outside, the sound magnified in the silence. She swayed forward and Cord's arms immediately braced her.

"Oops. Forgot to exhale," she said with a light laugh, kneeling and quickly jerking his jeans off. She hadn't even known his shoes were gone until she realized his feet were bare. Back up she went, grappling at the waistband of his briefs and tearing them down and off without finesse.

A strangled groan worked its way from Cord's throat when her fingers brushed over his glorious, hard cock. *Soon*, she told herself, soon he'd be buried deep inside her, plunging, driving her wild.

Her hands circled his thick shaft and she swallowed. Her tongue slipped out for a taste and she —

"Enough." Cord wrenched his body away, grasping her wrists and pushing them to her left. "Now undress Rio. Eyes remain shut."

"When did you get so bossy?" She asked the question just as her fingers encountered Rio's naked torso. A small moan of appreciation sounded in her throat.

"Complainin'?"

"Never." Juli blew a kiss in Cord's direction then focused all her attention on Rio. Remembering they were already open, she aimed deft fingers at the sides of his jeans and knelt before him, easily maneuvering the denim down his hips and toward the floor. His boots stalled her progress but rather than let that deter her, Juli closed her eyes tighter and pressed her face against his cock. Through the thin cotton of his underwear, the rigid shaft of his erection pressed right back. She kissed him through the fabric and brought her hands around his thighs, grabbing the hair-roughened skin just below his ass. She rubbed her chin along his cock and directed her face toward his.

Smiling, she slipped her fingers beneath the leg edgings of his boxers and gripped his muscled ass. "Boots're in the way."

"Remove them," Cord barked.

"Fuck that," Rio said harshly, bending forward and hauling her to her feet. Her eyes popped open in surprise and she found Rio grinning at her. He fell backward atop the mattress, bringing her with him. Juli's legs landed on either side of his and she felt him straighten one leg between the vee of hers. "Junior. My boots."

"Damn you," Cord muttered behind them as he wrestled with Rio's boots. "I'm not that much younger."

Juli was laughing. Laughing and kissing Rio and thanking her lucky stars for putting her in this exact place, in this exact time. Scrambling to the foot of the bed, she grappled with Rio's pant legs and pushed them off as soon as Cord removed the boots. Socks and underwear quickly followed and she was staring at the love of her life, hairy and sexy, just as she'd dreamed. Scarred too, but gazing back at her with such confidence, that the shiny puckered flesh was so easy to overlook, so easy to accept.

Juli kissed a bony kneecap and flopped on her side, looking back at Cord. "So, junior, you going to stand there all night or join us?"

Growling, eyes twinkling, Cord launched himself onto the bed next to Juli, causing the mattress to bounce.

Did either of them have any idea how much this meant to her? What they were giving her?

They must.

And for their love, she'd give to them in return. Anything and everything they wanted. Biting her lip in excitement because she already knew the answer, Juli asked, "What's next?"

"*Nos chinga hasta las vacas viene a casa,*" Rio's gravelly voice answered.

"What?"

"I said, we fuck you until the cows come home. Now come here."

"Aren't you two forgettin' something? And man, Rio, does your dirty talk need some work."

Juli patted Rio on the side of his right hip, her hand heading toward his cock. "I'll take dirty talk from the two of you any way I can get it." Her fingers closed around him. "What'd we forget?"

"Seein' as how I'm the only one in the room *without* an aged, feeble-minded brain," Cord drawled, "let me remind you what comes next..." He nodded to the nightstand behind Juli. "Condoms. Slide an' glide." He wiggled his eyebrows on the last phrase.

Reluctantly yet smiling, she released Rio and leaned over the bed, opening the drawer and pulling out two square packets. Then she reached in for the Creamy Glide lubricant he'd bought in town. The lube he hadn't used since.

Had he been saving it? For something like this?

At the thought, her own cream ran thick, slicking her inner thighs, and her body sizzled with awareness. Knowing that they watched her, waiting... Knowing that the pulse between her legs pounded, waiting...

She tossed the tube on the bed and glanced behind her, her smile faltering. Found both men staring at her indulgently. Excitedly. Her gaze flicked downward to their ready cocks. Both strong and eager. Both ready to pummel her body in ways she'd only imagined. Her pussy ached at the thought.

Juli whipped her head around and ripped at the condom's packaging. Packaging that wouldn't give.

Now that the moment was here, finally here, unwanted apprehension had made its appearance. She pushed it away and looked for the tear notch in the foil wrappers. After all, it couldn't be that difficult to take two men at once, could it? Her body was more than primed; her mind had thought of little else for days—weeks practically! It was what she wanted, so why was she suddenly nervous?

The frenzied way her heart beat? The way her hands were mangling the condom packets? Or the knowledge that she was so close to fulfilling a fantasy many women dreamed of and what had *she* ever done to deserve it?

Embarrassed, Juli cast them another look over her shoulder. "Almost done."

Rio leaned forward and ran one finger up her side. "Take your time. We're not going anywhere."

The sheets would be destroyed by morning. Pussy juice, cum, sweat. Tears.

Her heart kept stumbling, its rhythm as uneven as her breath, and still the damn packets wouldn't open.

Cord shifted on the bed, brought his legs to the side near where she sat and lay back, both arms crossed behind his head, supporting it as he watched her fumbling attempts. "Hmm. Never thought she'd take this long."

Rio's fingers tapped over her shoulder. "Me either. So, Cord, you don't think she's changed her mind, do you?"

"Nah. I'm just thinkin' she needs more practice. And hey, you *do* know my name. I was beginning to wonder."

"Don't get used to it. *Joven.*"

"Oh great. So now I'm 'junior' in Spanish. *Ay caramba* all over again."

"Well now, you backwoods linguist, I'm *thinkin'* it's time we took things into our own hands. Past time."

"You got that right."

And while Juli watched her fingers tangle together, wondered if she really was too chicken to reach out and take the ecstasy that was hovering just in front of her, felt her dream of impossible happiness slipping away, each man arched forward and grabbed a condom out of her hands.

Before she could blink the pressure and nerves away, they'd both ripped open their respective packets and were applying the rubber to themselves, giving her a moment of privacy. They continued to discuss her as if she weren't sitting just inches away, a habit that was becoming rather annoying. Endearing too.

"Next time, what do you say we have her do this with her mouth?" Rio idly asked.

Next time? God, she loved the sound of that.

Cord whistled, rolling the condom toward the base of his cock. His hips lifted off the bed as he pumped through the circle made by his fingers. Eyes closed, face grimacing, he said, "Oh yeah, Juli's mouth. I'm imaginin' that right now."

Rio copied his actions but only after winking at Juli. The rubber sheathing his cock, he lay down and closed his eyes, stroking his shaft. "Juliana's lips, wrapped around my dick. Her tongue licking up and down. My fingers inside her slit, growing wet, feeling her muscles—her pussy muscles—clamping down."

Juli climbed between them, her heart lighter than she could remember. "I know what you're both doing."

But they ignored her. Rio groaned. His face had flushed.

Cord thrust harder into his hand. "My tongue licking her cunt, sliding around her swollen flesh, searchin' out her little love button—"

Juli laughed. "Love button?"

Cord opened one eye and said sternly, "This is our fantasy. Don't interrupt." The eye closed. His voice returned to seductive-smooth mode. "Finding that hard little pearl and licking all around it. Licking all the way up her pussy then divin' deep inside, tasting that salty-sweet cream that only Juli can make. Thinking of fucking her inside that tight, warm hole..."

They continued like that, alternating between them, telling her with words and actions, but more with their thoughtfulness, how much she meant to them. And turning her into one sex-starved nympho in the process.

"I can't stand any more!" She clambered to standing on the mattress and screamed. A trickle of sex juice slid down her inner thigh. "God! I'm ready! Ready!" She was shaking so hard, she almost fell down. Laughing, smiling, so damn horny she could come for a week. "Ready – please. No more."

As if that were the cue they'd both been waiting for, Juli found thought and action taken from her, found her will subverted by theirs, found out just what it meant to be sexually loved by two men who professed to *love* her.

It meant ecstasy. Pure, unadulterated heaven.

Centered inside her body.

Cord opened his eyes and jackknifed to a sitting position. God. If she'd made him wait another two seconds, he'd have blasted off in his hand and been really pissed with himself. As it was, he hadn't been this starved for sex since he was a teenager groping his date in the backseat of Grandpop's old Thunderbird. Thank God those days were over.

Cord had learned since meeting Juli how very special sex was when with a special person. Juli brought into his life all of the sunshine that had been missing the past eight years. He couldn't imagine going another eight without her and the way things were progressing, he no longer thought he'd have to.

Rolling to his knees, he snagged her legs and pulled, dropping her to the mattress between him and Rio. Arms and legs flailed, laughter rang out, but underlying everything was the heavy layer of arousal. His cock pulsed so fast, Cord felt like a battery-powered vibrator. And like that damn pink bunny, he was ready to keep going and going and going in order to keep Juli coming and coming and coming.

She felt slick and hot beneath his hands. Her skin was coated with a mixture of her cream and a light sheen of sweat. "Just you wait," he swore out loud, thinking how sweaty the three of them were about to become, "we're about to prove to you just how ready you are."

She gripped his shoulders and looked up at him as he knelt over her body. "I'm ready," she said, flicking a glance between both him and Rio. A glance filled with love and a tad of trepidation. "More ready than either of you will know. I..." Another shift of her eyes then they settled on his. "I love you. I –"

Before he had to listen to her tell Rio the same thing, Cord swooped down and took her lips, kissing her hard and fast, kissing her thoroughly. Plundering that beautiful too-wide mouth that he'd have to wait until another time to feel stroking his cock, if he wanted to make her dreams come true tonight. Sliding his tongue against hers, he battled her apprehension away, determined that only pure desire would rule the coming moments.

Cord knew he still had some personal issues to work through, some demons to fight, but he looked forward to the challenge now instead of shrinking from it, dreading it as he had for months, maybe years.

He looked forward to living his life.

For unlike war, when the only way to survive was too deaden yourself, he realized that the only way to live, really live, was to embrace life, all of its ups and downs, all of the confusion and uncertainties. All of its joyous bounties...like the bountiful piece of joy in his arms.

Next to him, he felt Rio move around the mattress until he had better access, more room. Together, they splayed Juli's limbs, Cord refusing to temper his loving assault on her mouth, even when he felt her nails scrape from his shoulders down his arms. Cord clasped her palms and pulled her arms straight out. He sensed Rio doing the same with her legs.

Juli was bucking into the air below him, as if she thought his cock was a heat-seeking missile and her pussy was guiding it home. When he started to pull his tongue from her mouth to tell her how she made him feel, she dug in with her teeth and sucked it deep. Cord growled low in his throat and released the tension in his thighs, lowering his cock until it brushed between her legs.

Her pussy was hot and wet and wonderful, and he wanted to lose himself in her forever. Cursing the damn condom, imagining how she'd feel against his skin, Cord nudged the head of his cock against her cunt lips and heard her groan around his tongue. He had to feel her heat.

Cord pried one hand free and brought it to her pussy. Gripping his erection near the tip, he fisted his shaft and ran his knuckles along her saturated labia. She moaned and arched against him furiously and he did it again, allowing his thumb to dip inside, which only whetted his desire for more.

Hearing Rio's breath grow harsh beside him, Cord decided to play more later, once the edge was off. He released his cock, bunched his fingers, and thrust them just inside her pussy, gathering the viscous cream, which he pulled out and spread along his erection. Returning once more, he brushed the tip of his dick just inside her folds, raised high to tease her clit, heard her squeal, felt her suck so hard on his tongue, it was a wonder it didn't dislocate, and Cord smiled inside.

There was nowhere else he'd rather be. Nothing else he'd rather be doing.

The time for taking his time was over. Poised at her core, Cord pushed himself inside her pussy and once past the swollen, convulsing muscles at her entrance, slid deep. Deep and tight. Juli hugged his erection with her vaginal muscles, stopped milking his tongue and started milking his cock, even as her kisses pressed hard against his lips.

Aware of the man still hovering beside them, Cord set up a methodical pace, leisurely plunging his cock inside Juli, staying there a second, giving his hips a little twist then pulling out as slowly as he could and doing it all over again. Sweat quickly coated his forehead and he tugged his other arm free to wipe it off. Thinking of everything else he couldn't wait to do to Juli, along with Rio—the possibilities seemed

endless—Cord lowered his body fully atop hers and rolled over, taking her with him, until his back pressed against the mattress and she was exposed to the air.

Juli stopped kissing him and tucked her face into the curve of his neck. She began humping his cock in earnest and whether knowingly or unknowingly, presented Rio with fine access to her fine ass.

Cord wrapped his arms around her back and held on. He glanced at Rio and nodded. “She’s ready.”

But he didn’t think Rio needed the words. The other man looked happier than Cord had ever seen. Though his face and body strained with the need for orgasm—for action—Rio knelt on the bed, fisting his erection, lovingly caressing Juli’s hips, butt and thighs with his free hand.

Cord knew the unique experience that Rio was about to find inside Juli’s most personal hole and his cock grew harder at the thought.

Rio stood with one leg on the floor, one bent knee on the bed, watching as just inches away Cord made slow, sweet love to Juliana. His love. And the remarkable thing? He *loved* it. Absolutely loved it.

Loved watching his woman being pleased, loved seeing the explicit sight of another man’s cock splitting her pussy lips and disappearing inside her body. A tiny twinge, somewhat akin to jealousy, but not quite there, told him he wouldn’t feel this way about any man. He wasn’t about to start sharing his woman indiscriminately or with anyone else on the planet. No, it was the knowledge that Juliana inexplicably cared for and loved them both, that her heart was entwined with Cord’s just as it was with his that gave Rio the feelings of excitement and exhilaration as he watched. Feelings that exponentially ramped up his own.

His fisted palm had stroked his penis so many times, his arm was on automatic pilot, giving him leave to explore her exposed curves with the other. He kept bending on his good leg, altering his view, enabling himself to watch something he’d only before seen in porn videos—those experiences few and far between and always accompanied by shitty pulsing music and lame acting.

This was real. Their feelings were real. Their bodies were real. Even his, scarred and imperfect as it was, it was perfect for the moment—perfect for Juliana. Perfect for him. Why? Because it was all his, everything was in working order—thank God—and despite the old scars and injuries, his body could still *feel*. Feel and give pleasure.

Every time he stroked his fingers over the pale globes of Juliana’s ass, her flesh quivered and she twitched, arching her hips, grinding herself into Cord’s groin while at the same time opening the crevice that split her bottom, inviting Rio in. He knew she was nervous. Hell, so was he.

He’d never before entered a woman there. Seen it done on tape, sure, thought about it several hundred times over the past few weeks, but never actually done it. And now

he would. In seconds, he would be putting his cock inside Juliana, in her tightest, most private place.

Rio leaned over and picked up the tube, his hand shaking as he unscrewed the cap and squeezed the gel over his fingers to warm it a bit then rubbed it across that inviting tiny bud of hers. Spreading the lube, he stroked 'round and 'round her flexing sphincter and she squirmed upward, moaning in need. Rio couldn't help it—he looked past her body into Cord's eyes.

The other man was watching him. Not judging, not encouraging, but not condemning either. Just accepting. Accepting that Juliana needed them both. Maybe always would.

Rio quirked his lips, trying for a smile, but failing miserably. "Just taking my time." His words came out strangled as he reapplied the cap and tossed the tube aside after spreading another line of gel along his shaft. "Not every day I'm in this position."

"Don't I know it," Cord commiserated, and without being asked he slid his hands from Juliana's back to her bottom where he pressed his fingers into her buttocks and spread her cheeks wide.

Rio almost choked at the delectable view.

"But you might want to get a move on," Cord said on a gasp. Rio had noticed his hip motions had sped up and weren't quite as lethargic as earlier. "Not sure how much longer I can last."

Rio wanted to make a quip about lasting all night. He wanted to get another jibe in, give the younger man what for, but he didn't have the effort, not when it took everything in him to move slowly, to keep from ramming himself inside Juliana's anus without care.

No matter that he was shaking, no matter that his fist had turned into a vise at the base of his cock, refusing to let his body come, no matter that he had another man watching his every action, Rio was focused on the woman between them.

He climbed fully onto the bed and knelt between Cord's spread legs, coming right up to Juliana. He brought both hands to where she and Cord were joined, felt his heart catch, and continued on, holding on to her inner thighs and sliding his hands inward. With every upward thrust Cord made into her body, Rio's hands moved closer until he was touching Juliana right where Cord was plunging inside. Wet heat enveloped his fingers, which was just what he wanted. Because store-bought gel or not, he wanted *her* cream. Her heat.

Feeling his pelvis rock toward hers, Rio salvaged what essence he could and brought his fingers upward, sliding them and her juices straight up her crack until reaching her anus. Knowing that Cord had stretched her earlier, knowing from Juliana's whimpers and actions how very aroused she was, knowing from the way his heart pounded and his cock throbbed that now was the time, Rio gripped his erection and placed the tip at her anus.

The other man stopped moving.



"Relax for me, baby," Rio encouraged, feeling the tight ring open and close against him. He wedged his thumb inside and she gripped it with her ass and tugged hard. It immediately slid in to the base.

Her muscles milked his thumb and Rio rotated his arm, widening the narrow channel. She lunged against him again and he drew his thumb out and immediately replaced it with the tip of his cock. Breathing heavily, he guided his wide head past the tight sphincter.

Rio wasn't sure what he'd expected. Resistance, heat, the unbearable need to plunge forward, her squeal – of protest? Of pleasure?

He wasn't sure, but he received all of that and more, for as soon as he'd breached the narrow ring of muscles near her opening, Juliana welcomed him inside and his cock slid into the deepest, tightest, most wonderful place on the planet.

His woman.

He fell to his arms over her. Juliana cried out and flailed back into his groin, impaling herself hard on his erection. Cord turned his face and buried it in her hair, no longer watching him, but renewing his strokes.

Rio felt the other man plunging inside Juliana's pussy, felt his cock through the thin layers of her body. But most of all, he felt the way she reached behind her with one arm until touching his hand where it bunched the covers. She gripped his wrist and wedged her fingers beneath his palm, holding on to him as she continued arching between them, bucking between them, riding their cocks like a dream.

And Rio had *it* – had everything he'd ever wanted since making the fateful mistake that cost so many people their lives. He had acceptance. He had her love.

Below him, Cord stiffened and yelled out his orgasm. Rio felt him twitch and still. Juliana kept bucking wildly, holding on to his hand and he knew she'd never let go. He reached between their bodies – Cord's and Juliana's – with his free hand and found her clit. Placing his fingers at the swollen, protruding knot, he rotated them and thrust his cock inside her bottom, waiting for that shift in tempo, that little catch in her throat that would signal to him she'd –

And there it was. Juliana screaming on one long, low wail, her body convulsing over his, around his, her heart entrapping his forever as she climaxed. Finally! Finally he was free to do the same, to claim his woman.

Rio dipped his head and kissed along her shoulder, still now, her body lying pliant atop Cord's, vibrating in the aftermath. He reached her neck and breathed into her ear, "I love you, *ángelita*. Love you, love you..."

And he came. His cock reaching so far inside her body, he swore he touched her soul, exploding with his release and knowing that by giving up himself, releasing his fear as well as his seed, he'd found everything he'd ever wanted in return. Everything he could have hoped for. He had it all.

*Juliana.*

## Epilogue

Juli stood between Rio and Cord, her natural place these days, and all three of them stared up at the plantation house.

After several months of backbreaking labor, intermixed with on-their-backs relaxation, the house—which previously boasted walls of battered wood covered in peeling paint, dingy, broken windows and had provided shelter to more than one family of rodents—had been transformed into something so beautiful it looked straight out of a *History of Virginia Plantations* book.

Now a brilliant country yellow with new white shutters and porches, sparkling windows and a de-weeded yard—thanks to Juli and her sore knees—the house literally glowed under the rays of sunshine that streamed down upon it. Perhaps because it wasn't just a worn-down house anymore, but a home. One filled with laughter, hope and love. Lots of love.

One hand stuffed in the pocket of his worn blue jeans, the other wrapped around a tall glass, Cord gazed at his boyhood home, grinning like a kid in a candy store with fifty cents just for Red Hots. "This place has never looked better."

Juli had just made celebratory lemonade and insisted they go back outside to enjoy it and the visible success of their efforts. If she had a pine needle for every drop of sweat they'd expended refurbishing the old house, they'd reach to Mars.

Cord raised his glass, saluting them both, even though his eyes remained fixed on the house. "Here's to all three of us and this beauty. She's better than I remember and we made it happen workin' together. Juli, Rio, thanks. Couldn't have done it without you. Wouldn't have wanted to."

"It does look good. Damn good," Rio agreed. Despite the comfortable spring temperature, his brow glimmered with perspiration from a hard day's work. With the back of his glass, he wiped his forehead. "Never would've imagined it—that we could accomplish so much in so little time."

"No kidding. The place was such a wreck when I got home, it was a wonder you bought it," Cord said on a smile. "Lucky for me you did."

"Lucky for all of us." Juli couldn't believe how her own luck had changed. From starved for affection to treated like a queen—if one could overlook their continued digs about her cooking. Which she could. Easily.

The changes the past half a year had brought to her life were amazing.

The Super Bowl had come and gone, Rio's precious Redskins making it to the playoffs, but no further. Tom and his wife had come out for the big football weekend, ostensibly to enjoy the game. More interested in Juli and Rio's personal life, she secretly

suspected, but other than an arched brow and a knowing look when they departed, no disapproval had been shown. In fact, Gina had exclaimed she'd never seen Rio so content.

If not for watching leaves drop from the trees and pile on the ground then seeing the minimal snow accumulations that Rio claimed kept him trapped and unable to return to DC twice this past winter, Juli would've thought time had stood still. That she was dreaming this all up...that it wasn't really her, a woman formerly all about drive and success, who'd taken a leave of absence from her high-powered job and questioned every day whether she'd go back. A woman in love with two men...currently planning a surprise trip to Disneyland for all three of them.

"Seems kind of a waste to just keep this renovation work to ourselves, doesn't it? I've been contemplatin' options for a while," Cord pondered out loud. "And I'm thinkin' I just might turn Willow Creek into a retreat. A place for soldiers to come and decompress or something. I don't know... Maybe a camp for sick kids, burn victims." Cord glanced at Rio to gauge his reaction. "Got an opinion? Think I'm off my rocker?"

"Helping people, huh?" There was a speculative gleam in Rio's eyes. "A worthwhile endeavor, dedicating your life to helping others. That's something a man can be proud of."

Cord looked at Juli, studying her. "What do you think? We could start on bunkhouses next, maybe revamp the barn? Have the place habitable by the end of summer?"

The wheels were already turning. Tugging his hand from his pocket, she threaded her fingers through his, squeezing. "I absolutely love the idea. I could renew my contacts at the station, garner some publicity once we're up and running, check with the hospital I did the piece on, get more information if we decide to go that route. Rio? Any ideas?"

Rio set his empty glass at the base of the oak then stood and crossed his arms, assessing the property. "Gonna be a shame to leave this place. A real shame."

After all that had happened, Rio had opted to commute between the plantation and his life back in DC, using the excuse that he wanted to help Cord out, repay him for all he'd done.

Juli knew better. Rio loved it here, just as she did. Loved all three of them being together. But he'd yet to admit it. Or state whether he'd keep coming back, now that his "debt" was repaid.

Cord knocked back the rest of his lemonade and lifted his gaze to Rio. "So don't. Don't leave."

The words were practically a dare.

"The land market has been down the past three quarters," Rio commented idly, drumming his fingers on his upper arms as if he hadn't a care in the world, as if he weren't deciding the fate of his life. He turned toward them. "I do have a great staff in place...they might be interested in buying me out and, now that I think on it, real estate

hasn't exactly been all I'd expected. Kind of boring, after all the excitement of hanging around you two."

Juli gathered the empty glasses and put them in a secure place on the opposite side of the tree then stood there with her back against the trunk, evaluating Rio. He still hadn't given them an answer. She looked at Cord and raised her eyebrows in an *ask-again* type of motion.

Cord gestured toward the barns. "Still have a lot to accomplish. Certainly could use your help."

Just like a man—God forbid one of the stubborn creatures express a more heartfelt sentiment to another male.

"Juliana?" Rio questioned, uncrossing his arms and taking one long step closer to her. "What do you think? Should I stay?"

What? Did he want it engraved? "I love it here. With *both* of you," she stressed. "I don't want to see anything change."

"*Nada*, huh?" Rio took another step toward her. "So it would be accurate to say that you're..." She could tell from the teasing look in his eyes that she probably wasn't going to like what came next, but it had a good chance of making her the happiest woman in the time zone. So she waited patiently.

Okay, not so patiently. "I'm what?"

"Satisfied?"

He had the audacity to remind her she'd claimed she couldn't be satisfied with just one of them? The rat. "If I knew how to call you a skunk in Spanish, I would."

"*Un mofeta? Que mona!*" Rio paced forward yet again. "You think I'm a skunk?" And again. "How very cute."

Grinning, Cord advanced on her, matching Rio's actions step for step. He elbowed Rio in the side. "Yeah, old man, I'd say we've learned how to keep our Jules satisfied."

"Think so, junior?"

Oh please. Juli rolled her eyes, even as her stomach did a happy little dive. "Can't you just admit you care about each other? That you both *want* to stay here? Together."

"And why should we admit that?" Rio asked, stopping just inches away.

Cord mirrored his action. "That'd take all the fun out of beatin' him every time we race to the creek."

Rio raised a brow. "Or every time I wax his hide arm-wrestling."

"Jerks. I know you care for each other. Why don't you just—"

Simultaneously, they covered her like linebackers sacking the opposing team quarterback. Only instead of a football being their focus, *she was*. They sandwiched her against the tree, their bodies pressed indecently close, creating a very, very decent amount of heat. Juli thought about protesting but decided why bother—they all knew she loved it when they double-teamed her.

"Lady, you've no idea just how lucky you are," Cord drawled, turning her to face him. He stared down hard, his eyes devouring her.

"Oh, I think I do."

Rio's growing erection rode her backside, his hands snaking around her torso to mold her breasts through her shirt and bra. Her body came alive.

"But I'm thinking I may need a reminder," she taunted, rotating her hips against both men. "Why don't you show me?"

"Much obliged." Cord went for the fastening on his jeans, wrenching the buttons free. "We love showing you our cocks."

"Mmmm. Promises, promises," she murmured, reaching behind her to help Rio with his zipper and loving their private plantation oasis all over again. "But these cocks need condoms, big boys."

"Nah. Not this time," Rio breathed over her shoulder, his lips latching on to her ear lobe. "Did you forget the results?"

"Ah. Umm." Through the haze of growing arousal, Juli recalled the testing they'd all agreed to get last week. Their results had been negative, which all three considered positive.

During their trip into town, Cord had introduced her to his counselor for the first time, a privilege that had touched Juli to the core. And she couldn't remember the last time Rio had even mentioned his scars.

As for herself, she was certain of one thing—she was finally living. Perhaps not conventionally, but it no longer mattered to her, so long as she woke every day to the sunrise. Noticed the stars every night.

All in all, the three of them had grown into one. Comfortable with each other, at peace...*satisfied*, in every way that counted.

Yeah, things were looking up. And her clothes were coming off, given the way Cord abandoned his jeans and focused on her shirt.

Rio flung her ponytail over her shoulder, his lips following right behind. His fingers found their way beneath the cups of her bra and tweaked her nipples. He pinched a little harder as if to command her full attention. "*Ángelita*. Cord. I propose we forget about condoms from here on out. What do you think of that?"

In front of her, Cord's motions stalled. He stared over her shoulder at Rio. "Seein' as how that kind of talk translates into you stayin'..."

Cord trailed off as if waiting for confirmation.

"It does." Rio's hands abandoned her breasts and slid beneath the waistband of her open jeans, gripping her hips. Fingers delved inward. "*Definitivamente!*"

Juli saw the happiness Cord didn't attempt to hide. "Then no condoms it is, from here on out." He fished his erection from his briefs and spoke downward. "Hear that, little guy—I mean *big* guy!"

Juli and Rio started laughing.

While Cord tried to talk his way out of that one, Juli thought about being intimate with the two men who meant more to her than anything else on the planet, without *anything* between them—no emotional boundaries, no fear, not even a thin piece of rubber...

The knowledge fired her desire and she quickly stepped out of her jeans and panties then grappled with her bra clasp, not an easy task when Rio was pressed along her back, still laughing at Cord's recent antics.

It was a commitment—sex without protection. An emotional commitment. Maybe not a piece-of-paper marriage certificate, but she'd never really yearned for legalities anyway, not when emotion meant so much more.

Rio was making a true commitment, to her, to Cord, to their life together here. It was all she'd ever wanted, except...

"Wait a minute." Almost nude and totally horny, Juli suddenly stilled, biting her lower lip. Did Rio have any idea what he was saying? "I could get pregnant. With either one of your children."

"I realize that." Rio kissed down her shoulder, tugging the bra strap away with his mouth. "And I realize that's a chance I'm willing to take. I'm feeling pretty lucky myself. Have been ever since I kidnapped a drunk reporter and saved her from a night of married-man debauchery. One of my finer moments, don't you think?"

That garnered Cord's attention. "'Married man'? Juli? It seems you two have a tale to tell." Naked, he stepped forward and turned Juli around until she faced Rio and Cord was snuggled against her back. "Do go on."

Staring into Rio's smiling face, seeing how the pain in his expression, the guilt was gone, erased until it was nothing but a memory—a fading one at that—Juli knew he was right. They were ready for this next step, all of them. "Don't you dare," she threatened, reaching up to his nape and tugging on his rapidly growing hair. He hadn't gotten it cut in over three months. "Don't you dare bring that night up or—"

Cord slid his hand in front of her face, his index finger arrowing inside her mouth against her tongue. Reflexively, she closed her lips around it and began sucking.

Behind her, he said, "Found one way to shut her up."

Rio stepped in between her legs and began a slow journey with his hands. From framing her cheeks, to gently caressing her breasts and stomach, to dipping ever-so lightly inside her thighs, he fanned her need higher. "That you did, Mr. Ramsey, but I find I rather like hearing her scream."

"Like when one of us does this?" Cord placed his other hand on her low back and insinuated one finger between her cheeks. And he just left it there. No movement, no teasing, no *satisfaction*, just building the ache. She moaned around his finger, ground her teeth into his skin.

"Yep," Rio drawled, sounding a lot like Cord, "just like that. Or like this." And he kissed his way down her torso and knelt before her, quickly spreading her open to his gaze—and tongue.

Helpless to resist, Juli found her hips rocking against his mouth. Cord's fingers started teasing—both of them. The one inside her mouth traced her teeth, pulled in and out, gliding all over her tongue while the one on her bottom began pressing a little lower, a little higher, a little deeper...until it was poised at the entrance of her anus.

She moaned around his finger, ready for them to throw her down on the dirt and have their wicked way with her or carry her off to the barn and toss her over a bale of hay or storm up the stairs like Neanderthals and love on her all night long. What would it be this time?

Cord slid the finger from her mouth and stepped to the side. With pressure to her chin, he turned her head. "And what about you, Juli darlin'? You like the thought of taking us inside your pussy—no restraints, no barriers? Just hot, slick skin stroking inside of you? You like the thought of feeling our cum shooting into your cunt? *Do you?*"

One hand was already tangled in Rio's hair, keeping him right between her legs—though he didn't seem to be in any hurry to leave. She cupped Cord's chin with the other, her fingers caressing his sandpapery jaw. "What about you?" She was so excited it was hard to speak. Rio's tongue kept driving her higher. "Are... Are you positive about this? Taking the risk? A child, even the possibility of one—"

"Is a huge responsibility." He grinned, gold sparking in those green depths. "And that's what I did all this for—joinin' the Army, protectin' our country—it was all for family."

"Family. I like the sound of—"

She never did get to finish her sentence, for Juli found her lips stolen by Cord in the most intimate of kisses.

As if sensing the commitment they were making, Rio stood and placed his lips on Juliana's the moment Cord leaned back. He thrust his tongue inside, sharing her taste.

Family. They'd finally found theirs with each other.

"Satisfied?" Rio released her mouth long enough to ask.

"Any more and I'd melt."

Taking a small nip of her lip, Rio turned around and crouched before her. "Hop on, woman. We're taking this inside."

"Hear, hear," Cord agreed, helping her climb atop Rio's back. She curved her feet around his waist, careful to lock them way, *way* above his precious erection.

Cord slapped her ass just as Rio began striding forward. "Now start talkin'. What's this about Juli and a married man? I want an explanation, a mighty good one, by the time we hit the mattress."

"Or what? More punishment?" she couldn't help but ask, but it came out sounding much too hopeful to her ears.

"If that's what it takes to satisfy Cord's curiosity," Rio had the gall to say while tickling the bottom of one foot and loping toward the house.

Winking at Cord, Juli laid her head against Rio's shoulder. "Oh, I'm very satisfied. *Very.* But I'm not sure I'm up for lengthy explanations, not when the alternative promises to be so much better," she taunted, loving her life.

Loving her men.

*Loving herself.*



## About the Authors

Slip between the sheets with **Alyssa Brooks**, erotic romance author...

Author of fun, flirty, and contemporary erotic romance and erotica, Alyssa Brooks currently writes for several publishers, including Ellora's Cave. She resides in Amish country, Pennsylvania, with her husband and daughter in a quaint farmhouse. When not writing and caring for her family, her days are filled with gardening and hiking. She also collects wind chimes, porcelain dolls, and snow globes.

Alyssa also publishes a free monthly ezine, *Wicked Escapes*, for fans of erotic romance. Chock full of free reads, columns, excerpts, and contests; fans can find this ezine at [www.wickedescapesezine.com](http://www.wickedescapesezine.com).

For someone who once turned down sex with her new husband so she could watch *Star Trek: TNG* (what was she thinking?) **Larissa Lyons** has come a long way.

Now an award-winning author of erotic romance and short story erotica, Larissa spends way too much time chasing after an intellectually challenged cat who eats carpet lint (and promptly pukes) all day long.

Visit Larissa's website for plenty of free erotic reads, a gooey dessert recipe—or ten—and to learn more about her crusade to make chocolate synonymous with health.

Alyssa and Larissa welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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