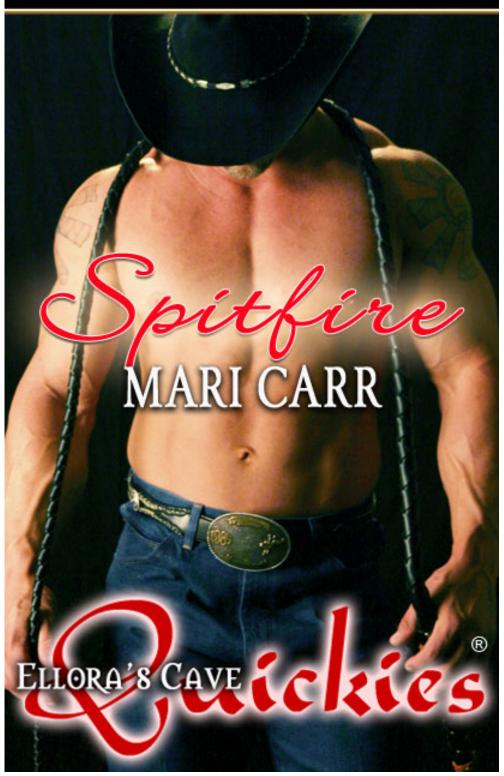
# Ellora's Cave Presents



#### An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



#### Spitfire

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# **SPITFIRE**

Mari Carr

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## **Chapter One**

"You promised, Jeb."

"Aw Liv, you can't hold me to that. I was drunk and—"

"Get the hell out, you asshole, and don't come back! I'm tired of your fucking games."

Rem grimaced as he stood on the front porch of his ranch house, the sounds of yelling coming through the screen door.

Some homecoming.

He saw Liv and Jeb going at it like gangbusters in the foyer. No doubt they'd failed to hear his truck pull up thanks to the battle they were waging. He stepped to the side so they couldn't see him, trying to figure out what the hell they were arguing about.

"Goddammit, Liv," Jeb shouted. "Can't you at least hear me out?"

"Hear you out?" Liv moved forward and shoved her older brother. Rem fought back a grin as he caught sight of his little spitfire. She was a foot shorter than he and Jeb and as she moved, he was momentarily struck dumb by the sight of her firm, full breasts in the too-tight blouse she was wearing.

Christ, was she wearing a bra? How the woman could make blue jeans and simple shirts sexy as hell, he'd never know.

Jeb threw his arms up to defend himself as Rem watched silently. Her slight frame didn't stop her from putting up one hell of a fight when they pissed her off. She may be small, but she was fierce. "Why the hell should I listen to *you*, Mr. Shit for Brains, when you never listen to *me*?"

Scowling at her coarse language, Rem reached for the door only to have it swing open roughly, nearly hitting him in the process.

"Fuck," Liv said, jumping back. She clearly hadn't seen him standing there and he'd startled her.

"We're gonna have to have a long talk about this filthy language of yours, spitfire," Rem said. "Don't recall you having such a gutter mouth when my dad was around. Hope you don't think I won't hold you to the same expectations as my old man."

Her tanned face—red with anger—darkened even further at his threat, and he was overwhelmed with the desire to see that same lovely flush covering other parts of her body. He shifted slightly to adjust his jeans, hiding the hard-on she'd produced just by looking at him with those beautiful doe eyes.

Then those same eyes narrowed and Rem shook his head. Damn girl had never practiced one ounce of self-preservation, and as she'd matured into a woman, it seemed that fact hadn't changed.

"You home to stay?" she asked angrily.

He nodded solemnly and crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for her anger to turn on him. She wouldn't be wrong to want to throw a bit of that fury his way. He'd stayed away too damn long and he wasn't sure this homecoming would be well received.

"Hey, Rem," Jeb said from behind the safety of the screen door. "We weren't expecting you. You really coming back for good?"

Rem muttered a soft "yes" in response but his eyes never drifted from Liv's face. He'd worried about her reaction to his return for weeks.

"'Bout time," was all she said as she turned back to her brother. "I meant what I said, Jeb. You run off to that rodeo again and you can just stay away. I won't spend one more minute of my life worryin' about you. I'm done with that."

"Dammit, Liv. Don't leave it like that," Jeb said, stepping out onto the porch.

Liv held up her hand to ward off the rest of his words before turning and walking away. She climbed into her pickup truck and pealed the tires as she drove off. Rem fought back the ingrained instinct that told him to go after her. She shouldn't be driving when she was so angry but he knew chasing her down would only make her angrier.

"You're going back to the circuit?" Rem asked as he turned to face the man who'd been more like a brother than a best friend for most of his life.

Jeb shrugged wearily.

"How the hell did you expect her to react, Jeb?" he asked. "She worries about you. Bull riders don't exactly have long life expectancies."

Jeb walked over to one of the rocking chairs and Rem moved to stand before him, leaning against the railing. "I knew she'd be pissed but dammit, Rem, I can't give the rodeo up."

Rem nodded. His friend had been bitten by the rodeo bug at eighteen and Rem knew no force on earth, short of death, would stop him from riding the circuit. Rem had taken off with Jeb after their high school graduation to try his hand at the rodeo as well, but three years of dust, bruises and battered pride had been more than enough for him. He'd quit, returning home for one brief summer before enlisting with the Marines.

Rem rubbed his eyes and tried to ward off the headache growing. "You were gonna leave her alone to run the ranch?" he asked, annoyed at the thought of Jeb leaving Liv on her own.

"Who the hell do you think's been runnin' it these last few months since Joe passed? I can't stay here, Rem. I've been living like a zombie. Liv tells me what to do and I do it. I'm not a rancher."

Rem had believed the same thing when he'd taken off to join the Marines. He thought he'd needed excitement and adventure to give his life meaning, a purpose. He'd thought a career in the military would make his father proud.

So much for that theory.

His old man was gone and their decade-long estrangement would remain an eternal one. He pushed back the regret and guilt that snuck in and attacked his insides when he least expected it. He'd come home to find peace of mind and a quiet life.

Oh Christ, who was he fooling? He'd come home for Liv.

He'd joined the rodeo at eighteen, only to come home at twenty-one to discover the girl next door had grown up. At seventeen, Liv was wild and reckless and so beautiful she made his gut ache. His father had seen the sparks flying between his son and his foster daughter and told him to get the hell out. He'd gotten out and limited his returns to only short visits for nearly a decade.

"I gotta go," Jeb said quietly.

"So go," Rem said. "You don't need my permission."

Jeb closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the chair. "I didn't mean to upset her, Rem. You and Liv are the only family I've got."

Jeb and Liv's parents had owned the ranch next to the Bradley spread. When Mr. and Mrs. Carter were killed in a car accident, leaving their two children orphaned, Rem's dad had stepped up and taken them in, raising them as his own. Jeb had been seventeen at the time, Liv only thirteen.

"Liv has a temper like a spark in a powder keg. You know that. Once she's had some time to calm down, she'll come around." Even as he spoke the words, Rem wondered at the veracity of them. He'd never seen Liv so angry, so desolate.

Rem's father, Joe, had died of a massive heart attack six months earlier. He'd come home briefly for the funeral before promptly returning to his unit. His father's death had cut deeply and left him with a mountain of regret but he was home now, ready to take up the reins of his inheritance and to claim the girl he'd left behind.

"You really quit the Marines? For good?" Jeb asked.

Rem nodded.

"So now you wanna be a rancher?" his friend asked with disbelief. It wasn't so long ago they'd both turned tail and run away from this place as fast and as far as their legs would carry them.

"Now I want to be a man my father could be proud of," he said softly.

"Shit, you already were," Jeb replied.

Rem shrugged and changed the subject. "When are you leaving?"

Jeb grinned guiltily. "Right now. I was hoping to sneak out while Liv was working in the barn. She caught me."

Rem shook his head, grinning. "Christ. No wonder she was pissed."

"I left her a note," Jeb said defensively before laughing. "That woman is mean as a rattler when riled. No way in hell I was gonna volunteer for her abuse. I figured I had a fifty-fifty chance of making a clean getaway."

"Yeah, well, I hope you have better luck on the circuit."

"Amen, brother," Jeb said, rising. "Guess I'll shove off. Don't wanna take a chance on her coming back before I leave. I don't think I'm up for round two. You'll look after her, won't you, Rem?"

Rem knew his friend wouldn't ask for such a favor if he knew the impure thoughts he'd been having with regards to Liv. He'd managed to fight back his attraction to her for years, keeping his distance from her during his short visits home, but seeing her at his father's funeral had uncovered and kick-started a bunch of latent feelings he hadn't realized were still there.

"I'll take care of her," he said quietly, praying he would be able to follow through on that promise. He had quite a bit of making up to do in regards to Liv Carter and, if her response to his return was any indication, she didn't intend to make things easy on him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where the hell is she?" Rem muttered to himself as he glanced out at the everdarkening night. After Liv ran out of the house, he'd said goodbye to Jeb then moved back into his old room. He'd had lunch and dinner and was officially ready to crawl out of his skin with worry.

A knock on the office door pulled him away from the window as Bridget, the ranch cook, came in.

"Hey, Bridget," he said. "Did Liv call?"

She shook her head. "No, and I have to admit I wouldn't be worried if you weren't here. Liv is a free spirit, always has been. When that girl gets mad, it can take her hours to blow off the steam."

"I know I haven't been around much, haven't spent much time with Liv since she's grown up," Rem admitted. "I'm afraid in my mind she's still somebody I need to look out for, take care of."

Bridget chuckled. "Yeah, well. You can certainly try but I have a feeling you might suffer for it."

Rem grinned. "Maybe things haven't changed that much after all. Liv didn't like being coddled as a little girl either. Always Miss Independent."

"That she is." Bridget's smile faded. "I made some phone calls after supper. Like I said, your worryin' seems to be infectious."

"Did you find out where she is?" he asked.

"You're not gonna like this. Promise me you won't overreact."

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Stan's Bar."

"What?" he yelled. "Of all the dangerous, stupid—"

Bridget tried to calm him down. "Now don't go gettin' all riled, you know Stan will keep an eye on her."

He grabbed his truck keys off the desk, heading for the front door.

"Don't yell at her," Bridget instructed as he strode across the porch.

He turned at her words. "Don't yell at her?" he asked incredulously. "She's gonna be lucky if I don't take her across my knee and paddle her ass black and blue."

Bridget shook her head as he opened the door to his truck and he clearly heard her yell, "Just so you know, that's what I call overreacting."

He slammed the door of the truck with so much force the whole cab shook. His blood pressure was skyrocketing at the thought of Liv hanging out in Stan's Bar. To say the place made a Hells Angels meeting look inviting was an understatement. Stan catered to the toughest and meanest drunks the merciless heat of Texas could produce.

Clearly she'd been given free rein since his father's passing, as it was painfully apparent neither Jeb nor Bridget had bothered to try to curb her reckless impulses. He'd have to cure her of the notion she could hang out in dangerous bars by herself. He had every intention of making sure the woman understood a little thing called common sense. His first lesson would involve convincing her that she should never set foot in Stan's Bar alone again.

As he pulled into the crowded parking lot of the bar, he tried not to growl at the large number of Harleys parked there. The clientele at Stan's hadn't changed much in the decade he'd been away.

He opened the door to the bar and was immediately besieged by the thick, rancid smell of stale cigarette smoke, liquor and sweat. He took a second to allow his eyes to adjust to the hazy, dark atmosphere.

"Hey, Stan," he said, making a beeline for the bar. Stan looked over at Rem with a grimace that he suspected was supposed to pass for a smile.

"Bout time you got your fucking ass over here. She's in the back," Stan said, never removing the cigarette that dangled from the side of his lips.

"The back," Rem said with disgust.

"I told her to stay up here where I could keep an eye on her, but somebody lit a fire inside her that I'm not about to touch."

Rem fought back a grin at the idea of Stan actually being afraid of Liv. "Jeb went back to the rodeo."

"Aw hell. Well, that explains it. You mind gettin' her the fuck outta here? She's back there with some rough customers, playing pool. Don't know whether to be worried about her or them, but either way I don't want my place gettin' wrecked."

Rem nodded, hoping he could drag Liv out peacefully but suspecting Stan had a right to be worried.

As he approached the back room, he was treated to a bird's-eye view of Liv's ass in tight denim jeans as she bent over the pool table to line up a shot. He had to fight back his growing arousal at the sight. Shit, the woman sure did know how to fill out a pair of Levi's.

One tough-looking customer in leather stood beside her and groped her ass. Rem took a step forward, ready to break the man's hand, but before he could react, Liv's hand shot around and grabbed the man's wrist.

"Butch, you have one second to take your hand off my ass before I shove this pool cue up yours," she threatened darkly.

Rem was surprised when the man laughed uneasily and stepped away. Liv bent down again to make her shot, sinking the eight ball in exactly the hole she'd claimed.

"I win," she said to a greasy-looking guy across the table. "Pay up, Slick."

"Double or nothing," the man said, looking extremely angry at being beaten.

"Fuck off," she said. "I told you I was only playing one game. Now give me my fifty bucks." She held her hand out and Rem held his breath at her daring. These guys were no doubt hustlers who were used to reeling in their victims and then bleeding them dry. Liv was seriously messing with their routine.

"You gotta give me a chance to win my money back," the guy insisted. "Gentlemen's rules."

"Last time I looked, I didn't have a penis. You gonna give me my winnings or not?" Liv asked.

The same man who'd grabbed her ass moved closer. "If you want a second opinion on that penis, I'd be happy to take you out back and have a closer look, Liv."

She shot the man a disgusted look. "I wouldn't waste my time, Butch. I'm pretty sure you don't have one either."

Several men laughed and Rem watched Butch clench his fists angrily at her insult. Time to move in.

"There you are," Rem said, walking up behind her and enveloping her in his arms. He tried not to spend too much time dwelling on how right she felt as he pulled her close to him. His cock came to life as her taut ass brushed against it and he gritted his teeth. This wasn't exactly the best place to sport a hard-on.

She twisted her head, looking over her shoulder at him in surprise. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

He bent down to whisper in her ear. "Taking you home. Come with me now and nobody in this room will get hurt."

"Slick owes me fifty bucks. I'm not leaving without it," she said.

Slick seemed an apt name for the man as Rem wondered what grease pit the asshole had crawled out of.

"I was explaining to the little lady that it's only polite to give a guy a chance to win his money back."

"And I told you—" she started angrily.

"We're leaving," Rem said shortly. "Give her the money."

Liv jerked lightly in his arms, clearly surprised by his demand. No doubt she'd expected him to merely drag her away.

The man began to protest again but Liv cut off his comments by slamming the pool cue on the table. "Are you trying to renege on our deal?" she shouted.

Several patrons who'd been drinking, not paying attention to the drama unfolding at the pool table, turned. Rem could see that while there might be an unspoken rule about playing a second game, there was a hard-and-fast rule about paying a debt. A couple badass customers walked to the table.

"There a problem here, little lady?" one of the men asked. Jesus, Rem thought, as he gazed at the giant. At six foot five, he wasn't used to looking up to any man, but this guy had him by at least three inches.

"Slick owes me money. Won't pay up," Liv answered. Several of Slick's friends had gathered at his back and as quickly as that, she'd thrown up the flag to indicate the beginning of the brawling phase of the night. He needed to get her out of here now.

"Let's go," he murmured in her ear, backing them both away from the pool table and forcing his way through the crowd gathering.

"No," she said, attempting to break his iron-tight grip on her. "He owes me money."

"I'll give you the goddamn fifty dollars," Rem growled. "Now move!"

Angry words began flying across the table and Rem wasn't sure who threw the beer bottle but within seconds, every man in the room jumped and he was reminded of a pack of wild dogs he'd once seen attack an unprotected calf. Chaos ensued.

He was shoved roughly from behind, losing his grip on Liv, who'd been waiting for a chance at freedom. She made her way over to Butch, grabbing the man and punching his jaw with the force of a trained boxer. Rem tried not to be impressed, but she was fierce and powerful and by God, she was going to be his. He couldn't wait to release that fiery spirit in the bedroom.

Rem knocked over three men, punching two others as he attempted to retrieve Liv before Butch could retaliate. His blood turned cold as he watched Butch reach down, grab a pool cue and swing it at Liv. She ducked the blow at the last minute, slamming forward into the man's gut with her head. Butch fell backward, crashing into a table before hitting the floor.

"You fucking bitch," he screamed as he attempted to get to his feet, slipping on spilled beer.

The hustlers made their way over to Liv, ready to attack, and Rem blocked a punch from one man while delivering a roundhouse kick to Slick, who'd attempted to sneak up behind him. He watched Liv dispatch the third man by smashing a beer bottle over his head. Rem moved forward, shoving Liv toward the back door as sirens broke through the air. The rioting mass of men scattered like ants at the sound of the police approaching. He managed to get Liv out of the building and around to his truck in time to watch four police cars pull into the parking lot.

She started to walk toward her own vehicle as Rem dug his keys out of his pocket.

"Not so fast, spitfire," he said, intercepting her and lifting her up with a strong arm around her waist. "You're riding home with me."

"My truck's right there," she said.

"You've been drinking. I can smell it on your breath."

"I had one beer," she said. She kicked up a fuss but Rem was in no mood.

He pulled the passenger door open and placed her none too gently in the seat. "Goddammit, Olivia. Sit still!" His words were harsh, loud, and she stopped fighting him as he hooked her seat belt.

"You are seriously pissing me off, Rem Bradley," she seethed.

He chuckled mirthlessly. "Oh darlin', you can't compete with me on pissed off right now."

He slammed her door shut and crossed to the driver's side. As he started the truck and pulled onto the road, he forced himself to calm down, forced himself to take several deep breaths.

"I hope to God you don't think you can start ordering me around now that you're home," she said.

Rem's vision went red with fury and he pulled the truck off the road, squealing the tires as he hit the brakes.

"Jesus Christ!" she yelled, bracing herself with both hands on the dashboard. "What are trying to do? Kill us?"

The memory of her initiating the massive fight at Stan's drifted through his mind and his temper snapped. She'd done nothing but test his patience since she'd turned seventeen. He'd shied away from staking his claim out of respect for his father and her youth, but that time had passed. Liv Carter had just spent her last night as a free woman.

Unhooking her seat belt, he grabbed her and pulled her across the seat. He didn't give her a chance to respond as he took her lips in a kiss that showed her exactly what she was about to become.

His woman.

He forced her lips apart, moving into her mouth with his tongue, tasting and touching every part of her he could reach. Dragging his hands along her neck, he dug his fingers into her thick, silky mass of light brown hair, using his grip to hold her head in place while he feasted on her plump lips.

He wasn't surprised by her initial astonishment. She remained motionless for several seconds before he felt her small hands pushing against his chest in a halfhearted attempt to fight him. He deepened the kiss and she responded for several glorious moments before he practically heard the wheels begin to spin in her lovely brain.

He pulled his face away from hers when she increased the pressure on his chest, trying to shove him away.

"Don't fight me, Liv."

"Don't kiss me," she whispered, her gaze averted.

He grinned, forcing her to look at him with a slight tug on her hair. "I'm gonna do a hell of lot more than just kiss you," he warned. "You might want to go ahead and accept that fact."

Her brown eyes narrowed but he was finished listening to her hostile words and bullshit. He reclaimed her lips and this time, she didn't shove him away as he pushed her onto her back, moving on top of her and caging her with his body. He ground his rock-hard erection into her stomach, backing up his threat with a promise. His body wouldn't be denied.

His fingers drifted down to her shirt, grasping her breasts through the thin material, fondling her.

"God, Rem," she murmured. The heat of her breath on his face and the need lacing her words stirred him on as he bent down to suck her covered nipple into his mouth, drawing on the tight bud.

Her hands gripped his shoulders and he gave the other nipple the same treatment before moving up to kiss her again. He started to unbutton her shirt, ready to stake his claim and ride her like the wildest stallion on his ranch. By God, he'd already waited far too long for her.

"Stop," she whispered, turning her face away from his kisses.

Her words and the sound of a car passing on the road gave him pause. What the fuck was he doing? His cock was threatening to split the denim of his jeans and he was ready to throw Liv's legs over his shoulders and pound into her in the middle of town. Shit, if the brawl in the bar hadn't broken out, he'd have thrown her over the pool table and taken her there. She heated his blood to boiling and he lost all sense of control in her presence.

"You've wanted this as long as I have, Liv. Don't try to deny it."

"Yeah, well, a lot has happened in the last ten years, cowboy. And don't forget, it was you who left me."

### **Chapter Two**

Liv fought against the impulse that told her she should shut the hell up, spread her legs and welcome Rem between them. The fact that she'd lusted for the man for nearly half her life would hardly come as a surprise to anyone. Her teenaged crush had started the year she'd turned seventeen and since then, her schoolgirl dreams had evolved into hard-core lust-fests that woke her up night after night, sweaty and aching.

Her comment seemed to douse the growing flames between them and she fought back a whimper when Rem rose and pulled her upright next to him on the seat. "You were seventeen, Liv. I was twenty-one. Last time I checked that's pretty much illegal in most states."

"And the last time I checked, that stopped being a problem on my very next birthday. It's been ten years, Rem. Ten fucking years. Ten birthdays."

He scowled at her and she returned the look. She knew Rem Bradley was used to getting his own way merely by flashing that dark, menacing look, but she'd never been easily cowed. If he thought he could bully her into following suit, he had another think coming.

"I'm not fond of this penchant you have for four-letter words," he said, and she laughed.

"Tough shit."

She watched as he gritted his teeth and she fought back a grin at his anger. It felt good to get a bit of revenge against the man who'd left her hot and hurting for years.

He sucked in a deep breath before starting the truck again. As he pulled onto the road, she wondered if he'd ever break the silence and offer her an explanation regarding his hasty disappearance from her life. Sure, he'd come home occasionally on leave, but he'd always maintained an uncomfortably large distance between them.

She'd tried more than a few times to rekindle the undeniable connection, the attraction she'd felt when he'd first returned home from the rodeo, but he'd continually rebuffed her attempts.

Her feelings for him had changed the summer before her senior year in high school. She'd never taken a serious interest in any of the local boys. The ranch and the horses had been her only loves, her life...until Rem came home. Three years on the circuit had changed her tall, lanky young friend in not-so-subtle ways, molding him into a muscular, carved-from-granite, sex-on-legs man.

She'd cornered him every opportunity she got, wearing short shorts and too-tight tank tops as often as she could get away with it, which wasn't often thanks to Joe Bradley's eagle eye. As hard as she worked to get Rem alone, Rem's father worked harder to keep them apart. She had no doubt Joe thought her infatuation with Rem was nothing more than a harmless teenage crush—until he'd caught her kissing Rem in the barn one afternoon.

Her memories of that day and that one kiss—her first kiss—had haunted her for years. "What did Joe say to make you leave?" she asked.

She watched Rem's grip on the steering wheel tighten and she knew she'd surprised him with the question.

He shrugged. "That was a long time ago. Does it matter?"

The familiar pangs of guilt that accompanied the memory of Rem's face when Joe had caught them tightened her chest. She'd sensed his agony at what he considered a betrayal. She'd never mentioned that day to Rem or Joe, but the pain of driving a wedge between father and son never lessened, never went away.

"It does to me," she whispered.

Rem glanced at her. Something in her face must have convinced him of her sincerity. "He said what he should have said." Rem's voice was gruff. "He told me to get the hell out."

Liv flinched. She'd always suspected, always feared that fact, but to have it confirmed cut her like a knife. She'd driven him away from his home. "I'm so sorry," she said softly, aware that her words were meaningless, useless.

"Sorry?" he asked. "Liv, that wasn't your fault. It was mine. I was an adult and I should have known better."

"I was relentless," she said, her fears, her pain spilling out. "I threw myself at you, time and time again. I was the one who kissed *you*. Not the other way around, Rem."

He sighed. "Christ, is that what you've been thinking all these years? I wasn't exactly fighting you off that afternoon. I may have put up a token bit of resistance, but how long do you think it would have been before I started initiating those kisses? Drinking from those sweet lips of yours? My father was right to send me away. You were too young for all the things I wanted to do to you."

He pulled onto the dirt road that led to the Bradley ranch and Liv tried to process his words. He'd fought her every step of the way that summer, telling her she was too young, telling her to go out with boys her own age. He'd pushed her away repeatedly but she'd been too stubborn to listen.

"You're wrong," she said as they pulled up to the house. "It was my fault your father sent you away. My fault the two of you fought and you can try to deny it, but I know I'm the reason you've stayed away so long."

She got out of the car and started toward the front porch, surprised when his arms wrapped around her from behind. "You aren't going into the house yet," he said, twisting her around and pushing her in the direction of the barn.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"We have some unfinished business to take care of."

She followed him, a sense of unease growing in the pit of her stomach. Unfinished business? The last time they'd been alone together in this barn, she'd kissed him and his father had sent him away.

As they entered, he walked back to the tack room, the site of their forbidden first kiss.

"Rem," she said, dragging her feet as he reached for her hand and continued to pull her along.

"Don't bother fighting this, spitfire. I'd say it's way past overdue."

She followed him into the tack room and watched as he closed and latched the door. The room was lit by a single bulb that provided only a dim amount of light.

Turning, he pushed her against the door. "You're right. You *are* the reason I stayed away."

Her heart broke with his confession, while her mind tried to reconcile his words with the heat scorching her skin due to his close proximity and lazy, sensual looks.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"What I want from you, Liv, what I need...it isn't tame and easy. I'm going to claim you, take you—make you mine in every sense of the word."

She gasped at Rem's terrifyingly sexy threat as he bent down to kiss her. His lips grazed hers lightly, a sharp contrast to his words and the heated, hungry kisses he'd given her in the truck.

"I want to finish the kiss my father interrupted all those years ago." He dragged his lips gently along hers and she was struck by the sensation that he was offering her a real first kiss. Had he known she'd never been kissed by a boy that day she'd cornered him? His lips continued to dance against hers with an innocence, a sweetness that took her breath away, destroying her ability to resist him. She'd wanted him forever and she was disappointed when he pulled back.

"I owed you a decent first kiss," he said, grinning down at her.

She fought back a groan as he stepped away from her, pulling a crate to the center of the room and sitting down.

"You know I wouldn't mind a second and third kiss," she said, returning his smile.

After years of being ignored and pushed aside by him, she should be telling him to take his kisses and shove them where the sun don't shine, but she'd wanted him far too long. Besides, what if he took her words at face value and she had to wait another decade or so for him to make another move? She may be a bit miffed, but she wasn't stupid.

He beckoned her by crooking his finger and she went willingly. He grasped her hips when she stopped a few feet away and pulled her closer. His face was eye-level with her pussy and she fought to catch her breath at the intimacy of their positions. She closed her eyes and silently prayed that no matter what happened tonight, he wouldn't stop. She'd gladly pay the piper tomorrow for one night with Rem.

"Pull down your pants," he demanded. His voice was deep with a military arrogance that insisted he was going to have his way. The tone sent a delicious shiver up her spine.

She reached for the button of her jeans, unclasping it before dragging down the zipper. Her heart was racing and her thoughts were a jumbled mess but she was too needy, too hot to stop this show.

She started to shimmy the tight denim over her hips but Rem stopped her with firm hands against her wrists. "Panties too," he added, when he realized she was leaving the scrap of lace in place.

The idea of being completely bare to him from the waist down started the butterflies fluttering in her stomach and she wondered if she should at least try to slow things down. Explain to him exactly how much *hadn't* changed in the last decade.

His hands went up to the waistband of her panties, bringing them down to meet her jeans. "Take them both off," he repeated, replacing her hands on the material.

She sucked in a breath, hoping it would calm her, before following his command, pushing the material down. She toed off her boots before kicking off both articles of clothing.

Before she could consider his next move, he reached up and gripped her wrists, pulling her facedown over his lap.

"What the hell?" she cried, trying to get up.

His hand landed on her ass in a series of sharp, fast slaps that stung more than hurt.

"That's for your foul language. You can be sure every time you throw another one of those four-letter words at me this is exactly where you'll end up. No woman of mine curses like a sailor."

Liv continued to struggle, furious at herself for getting trapped in this position. She wasn't *his* woman. He'd rejected her year after year. "You can kiss my ass if you think I'll let you—" she began, but her words were cut off by more smacks.

"I can see we may be here awhile, and I haven't even started to punish you for that barroom brawl." His next blows were harder and Liv bit back a cry. "No comeback, Olivia? No more threats?"

Her breathing was harsher now and speech seemed suddenly difficult. The spanking had crossed an odd line as she found herself subconsciously moving into his blows. His hand stopped after a particularly hard smack to caress her burning skin.

"Promise me you won't go into Stan's Bar alone ever again," he demanded.

She started to refuse but before she could utter a word, his hand dipped between her legs, his fingers caressing the entrance to her pussy.

She gasped at the delicate touch and fought back the urge to beg for more. She had her pride, after all. She refused to give in to him despite the fact her body seemed to be doing that very thing. She felt a gush of moisture gathering at her entrance and she knew the moment Rem felt it.

"Mmm," he hummed. "Wet and hot. I wonder if you're tight too." Rather than wait for an answer, he pushed one finger inside her as she moaned at the overwhelming impulses his single touch triggered in her body. "Jesus, so tight," he murmured reverently and she could only assume he liked what he'd found.

"Rem, I-" she began, her voice hoarse, weak.

"No," he said, cutting her off again. "Dammit, Liv. I've waited too long for you, wanted you too badly. I'm only human. If you're still angry, if you don't want me, say so. Otherwise I'm about two seconds away from putting you on your back on this floor and taking you—long and hard."

She shuddered at his words, her body hanging limply across his lap. She understood his sentiment, shared his agony. She didn't know what tomorrow would bring. After years of loneliness and longing, she was too terrified to hope for anything more than this moment.

"Take me," she whispered.

Strong hands pulled her up and she saw the slightest twinge of a grin touch his lips when she winced.

"You think it's funny that my ass is sore?" she asked, her hackles rising.

"Spitfire, I've thought of nothing but spanking that gorgeous ass since we left the bar. You've been a very naughty girl."

"Yeah, well, don't start thinking you can boss me around just because you're home now. I'm a grown woman, not a little girl, and nobody tells me..." His eyes narrowed as she spoke until finally her words died in her throat.

"What part of *my woman* didn't you understand?" he asked as he grabbed her hand and pulled her out into the dark barn.

Her mind whirled with his words. Twice now he'd called her *his*. Hope began to blossom in her heart but she ruthlessly stamped it down. She may give him her body tonight but he'd have to work for the privilege of holding her heart again. She'd given it to him a decade ago only to have him toss it back at her from the window of the bus that drove him off to boot camp and out of her life.

"What happened to you taking me on the floor?" she asked, anxious to make tonight light, fun, casual, though she wondered where she found the breath to tease him. She was literally gasping in anticipation.

"Thought you might prefer something a bit softer." He dragged her across the barn, grabbing a blanket and spreading it over a fresh pile of hay in the corner.

"Hay is softer?" she joked, and he chuckled.

"I don't have enough patience to put your pants back on and carry you to my bedroom. We've already wasted too much time."

He eased her down on the straw, reaching for the buttons of her blouse. With one quick flick of his wrists, he ripped the shirt open.

"Jesus," she whispered as his calloused hands reached down to engulf her breasts. He pushed her bra underneath, baring her hard nipples.

"God, you're sexy," he muttered as he bent down to suck her aching flesh into his hot mouth. Her back arched as her hands gripped his head. He was still sporting the Marine-issue buzz cut, but now that he was home, she hoped to convince him to let his dark blond hair grow back. For years she'd dreamed of running her fingers through it. He played with her breasts, nipping at the tight tips, squeezing them until she was panting and on the verge of begging.

She cried out when he stood but he shushed her gently. She lay on the blanket, feeling like a banquet feast as he looked at her with hungry eyes.

He stood in a shaft of moonlight and as she watched, he slowly removed his shirt, then his pants. She bit her lip to stop herself from whimpering at the sight of his naked body. He was impressive in clothing. Out of them, he was breathtaking. Her gaze drifted down to his cock, barely visible in the shadows, and for a moment, she felt a twinge of fear. He obviously hadn't lied about his intense desire. His cock was fully erect, thick and long.

He grinned when he realized what she was looking at, dragging his fist along his hard flesh. She licked her lips, wondering what he would taste like, and his eyes darkened.

"Come here," he demanded. She rose to her knees, never taking her eyes away from his cock.

"Put your mouth on me." His voice was dark, commanding, and she found herself reacting to what she was coming to recognize as his Marine tone. Moving forward, she reached out, her hand jolting slightly when she felt the heat radiating from him. His hands cupped her cheeks as he drew her face down, directing her course.

She'd always sensed the solid, implacable core of steel that resided inside him. The authority and strength that radiated from him made her want to follow him wherever he would lead. No doubt he was an excellent military officer.

She squeezed her legs together, fighting back the powerful sensations inundating her body as her lips grazed the tip of his cock and her tongue darted out to taste the salty drop of fluid resting there. A growl hummed deep in his chest and she smiled as the hands on her face tightened slightly.

She opened her mouth and slowly enveloped his hard cock.

"Give me your hand," he said, and she reached up. He wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock, showing her exactly how much pressure he wanted her to exert. "Move your mouth in unison with your hand, so you can love my whole cock."

She followed his directions, silently grateful for his help, and she wondered if he could tell she'd never done this before, never *wanted* to do this, before him.

He began to move his hips slowly, pushing into her mouth with shallow thrusts that soon started to go deeper. "Open your throat. Try to swallow me."

Her body trembled with need, with desire at the thought of taking him so deeply. He said he'd claim her. All of her.

Oh, how she wanted to be claimed by him.

On his fourth thrust, she found her rhythm and took him to the back of her throat. He groaned aloud and she loved his pleased, needy sound, desperate to hear more of the same. Over and over she swallowed his head as he whispered hot, dirty words that drew pictures of exactly how much he intended to claim. She thought she should be afraid, nervous, but she'd never been the type of woman to shy away from a challenge, to turn away from what she wanted. And her body wanted him badly. She would give him this because deep inside, she wanted the exact same things.

She began to move faster, stroke him harder, and was angry when he pulled away.

"No," she said, trying to reclaim his cock.

"Not this time," he said, pushing her hands away, lifting her face to look at him as he spoke. "I'm going to fuck your mouth soon, Liv. But this first time, the only place I'm coming is inside your pussy. Lie back down."

She did so, shivering with anticipation, but he mistook her reaction. "Shit. I should have taken you inside. Are you cold?"

"No, just lonely down here by myself. Come warm me up, Rem," she whispered.

He smiled at her request, reaching down to pull a condom out of his pants. "Are you on the Pill?"

She shook her head.

"Get on it," he said as he opening the wrapper and slid the condom on.

She grinned at his gruff, no-nonsense tone and wondered if she'd really have to bother with the doctor's appointment. It certainly seemed as if Rem intended this affair to last longer than just one night. She savored the thought of keeping him in her bed, in her body. What would it feel like to be able to hold him to her for weeks, maybe months, and to call him her lover?

She'd clearly never have to guess what Rem wanted in the bedroom as he was a master at making his desires known. He bent down and knelt at her feet. "Open your legs, spitfire," he said, and she blushed at the thought of showing herself to him in such an intimate way.

He gripped her knees and pulled them apart. "Like this," he said as his gaze drifted down her body.

She squirmed under his intense scrutiny and he frowned. "You never have to be embarrassed with me, Liv. You're beautiful." He reached down to touch her and for a moment she thought she detected a slight tremor in his hand. Perhaps she wasn't the only one affected by the intensity, the passion of the moment.

His fingers drifted along the insides of her thighs as she struggled to hold herself open for him, the desire to grab him and pull him on top of her at war with her ability to wait patiently.

"Hurry," she whispered, and he chuckled.

"No."

"Dammit, Rem, I-" she muttered, her words cut off by a sharp slap to her pussy. Her head reared back in surprise as her body rocketed to life with arousal.

"What did I say about that language?" he asked.

She wanted to throw every four-letter word in the book at him, frantic for more. Christ, she never knew, never realized how sexy a spanking could be. Lucky for her, she was an expert at pushing Rem's buttons. She anticipated all the ways she could provoke him into giving her more "punishments".

"Why does that grin have my insides churning?" he asked, and she realized her thoughts must be apparent on her face. He didn't wait for an answer as his hands drifted to her clit, his fingers pinching the swollen flesh until she was panting, pleading. How could he elicit so many glorious sensations with just a touch, a pinch, a kiss?

His lips drifted down to replace his fingers and she gasped.

"God, yes," she hissed as his tongue explored then tortured her needy flesh. He dipped his tongue inside her pussy and she felt as if she would shatter. He leaned up

for a moment, sucking one of his fingers into his mouth, tasting her essence before returning to her pussy. His hands joined his mouth this time, one hand toying with her clit, his other delving lower, uncovering more secrets and showing her there was even more pleasure to be had than she'd suspected. He pushed his wet finger into her ass to the first knuckle as her hips jolted up in surprise and desire.

"I'm going to claim all of you," he breathed against her cunt.

"Take me. All of me," she whispered, her breath deserting her. He moved over her, taking her mouth in a kiss that tasted uniquely of Rem...and her.

The head of his cock nudged at her wet opening and she closed her eyes in relief, in gratitude, as he slowly pushed inside.

His progress was slow and she heard him hiss then curse. "So tight, so fucking tight."

She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist as he forged in another inch. He looked up into her face and she repeated her earlier words. "Take me, Rem. I want you. Now."

He kissed her once before rearing back and slamming into her to the hilt. She screamed as her body protested—and she tried to push him away before she thought better of her actions.

"Fuck," he muttered, his body suddenly still. He looked at her, his gaze a mixture of anger and awe. "Is there something you want to tell me, Olivia?"

She'd expected his annoyance, had even foolishly hoped she could hide the truth. "Would it have made a difference?" she asked, throwing the ball back in his court.

"If you're asking if I would have taken you if I'd known you were a virgin, the answer is yes. The difference is I would have gone slower, easier, been gentler with you."

She laughed lightly. "And that's exactly why I didn't tell you. I want hard and fast and soon, dammit," she added when he continued to remain motionless.

He leaned down to kiss her, chuckling. "Jesus, Liv. You're perfect for me. You were definitely worth the wait. Hell, I'd wait ten more years for you if I had to."

She raised her eyebrow. "Rem Bradley, I don't want to wait ten more seconds. Now move."

He lifted up onto his hands and moved. Oh boy, how he moved. Although she'd asked for hard and fast, his sexy slide into her body was slow and sweet and exactly what she needed. He kissed her gently as he made love to her and she found her heart melting a little bit more from the heat of his touch.

The pressure built up more quickly than she would have imagined and she cried out with him as they were both lost in the moment—and for the first time in her life, she felt at home, at peace.

She was in love with him, had always been in love with him.

Dear God, she was so screwed.

### **Chapter Three**

Rem looked out the window of his father's—Shit, *his* office, and watched Liv work with a new mare in the paddock. He'd been home a month and the realities of what it meant to run a working ranch were just now sinking in. He would never have been able to make it through the day without Liv's guidance and he grinned as he thought about the irony of it all. His father had worked him and Jeb as hard as full-grown ranch hands when they'd been younger, pounding every bit of ranching wisdom he could spout into their heads. Liv, the tagalong, had been the only one to listen, to learn. She loved this ranch, their home.

He grinned as he remembered her lovely face this morning as she lay in his bed, her hair tousled around her on the pillow. He loved to watch her sleep.

He'd moved her into his room the day after he'd taken her virginity in the barn. Shaking his head, he still couldn't get over the fact that she'd never taken a lover. She was amazing and he fought back the ache in his chest that told him he didn't deserve her.

Gazing outside, he watched Liv slowly mount the horse. She'd spent days preparing to break it, getting it used to her and the saddle so she could ride the mare. He stood and walked to the window, forcing back his worry as the horse pranced nervously. He could see her patting the horse and speaking to it. She was a natural equestrian and sometimes he teased her about her ability to get along better with horses than people.

He shook himself for his anxiety and returned to the desk, trying to force himself to concentrate on the paperwork that had piled up since his father's death. While Liv was a born rancher, she clearly preferred the outdoors to working inside. He worked his

way through the mountain of invoices and bills while trying to decipher his father's system of bookkeeping.

He glanced over to check on Liv's progress just as the horse reared up. She was managing to keep her seat, just barely, but that was all Rem saw as he ran through the house toward the stable. As he approached the fence, he could see Liv leading the horse back to its stall. She smiled when she saw him standing there.

"Taking a break?" she asked.

"I saw the horse rear up. Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Damn bee stung her. How's that for bad luck? Of all days. Going to try again tomorrow. She's completely spooked now."

"You didn't fall off?" he asked, aware that his tone was terse. His body was tense from the fear that she could have been hurt.

"Fall off?" she asked, her voice filled with fake affront. "Just who the fuck do you think you're talking to, cowboy?" She laughed as one of the ranch hands took the horse from her and she walked over to place a quick kiss on his cheek. "Worried about me?"

He forced himself to relax but as soon as he smelled her skin—a combination of soap, horse and sweat that was oddly arousing simply because it was so Liv—he felt a different part of his body tense up.

"Very worried about you," he said, grasping her hand and tugging her toward the house.

"Where are we going? We've still got a lot of work to do today."

He glanced over at the fence he'd promised to mend this afternoon and shrugged. "We'll get back to it eventually. There's the issue of your punishment to take care of first."

"Punishment?" she asked, and he detected the slight breathlessness that accompanied the single word. His Liv was a sucker for a good whipping. Always set her off quicker than firecrackers in July.

"I counted two curse words." His spankings had done little to deter her foul language. In fact, he was beginning to suspect she used the words more frequently just to force his hand.

"Damn," she muttered, breaking into a big grin when he stopped to scowl at her.

"That's not funny, Liv," he said as they walked into the house and up to their bedroom.

Their bedroom.

He loved the sound of that.

Leading her to the bed, he released her and placed his hands on his hips. "Get those jeans off, woman. I'm gonna have to start putting you in skirts and keeping you inside where you'll be safe and sound. Besides, I don't like bein' kept waiting so long when you've been naughty."

Liv merely shrugged at his threat and he had to fight to remain impassive as she shimmied the tight denim off. The woman could work her curves better than a damn stripper—and she knew it. His mouth went dry at the sight of her bare bottom.

She turned to face him, her gaze seductive, her smile sweet. She was a rare mixture of angel and minx and he struggled to figure out which part he loved most.

Loved...

What would she say if she knew how he felt? He'd sensed her hesitance whenever he spoke about a future together. Despite his insistence that she was his and he was here to stay, he could feel her doubts.

She frowned and he wondered what she'd seen in his face.

"Rem? You really were worried, weren't you?"

He walked forward and pressed his forehead against hers. "I just want you to be careful, Liv."

"I am careful," she assured him. "I've been riding horses since I was five. You know that."

"What I know seems to be losing the battle against what I'm feeling. I just need you to promise you'll always take care of yourself."

She kissed him lightly. "I promise," she whispered.

He pulled away slightly to look into her chocolate-colored eyes. They twinkled mischievously and he shook his head at how easily she could sway his moods, set his mind at ease.

"While you're handing out promises, I'll have the one about you not stepping foot in Stan's Bar again. You've managed to avoid offering that one several times," he said. The fact she wouldn't promise to avoid the dingy bar was becoming a bone of contention between them.

She shook her head. "I'm not promising that."

"Why not?" he asked irately.

"Because you and I both know that sooner or later, you're gonna piss me off. When that happens, I'm going to Stan's. Believe it or not, that place is the perfect cure for my anger."

Rem closed his eyes for patience, trying to decide if he really wanted to know the answer to his next question. "Please tell me every time you go there you don't start a major brawl."

She laughed delightedly and he fought back the growl growing in his chest. He'd heard her bragging about their fight to several of the ranch hands a couple days earlier.

"No," she said. "That was actually the first time things got so exciting."

Exciting? He fought to restrain his ire. She thought that fight was exciting. She could have been seriously hurt. The image of Butch swinging that pool cue flashed before his eyes.

"Dammit, Liv-"

"Now don't get so worked up, Rem. I told you that was the first time that had ever happened. Usually I manage to work off some of my aggressions by kneeing some biker who comes on too strong. After they peel the guy up off the floor, Stan kicks him out and I feel better."

"Did my father know about this anger management routine of yours?" he asked, struggling with the image of his overprotective father allowing Liv to put herself at such risk.

"Dear God, no. He would've killed me." Liv shuddered at the thought and he had to fight back the laughter bubbling within him. She never failed to make him laugh.

"Promise you won't go back without me," he repeated.

"No," she said, her eyes taunting him. Oh yeah, she was itching for a punishment, but he wasn't going to accommodate her this time. At least, not in the way she wanted.

"Turn around," he said firmly. "Bend over the side of the bed."

She smiled as if he'd offered her diamonds and quickly complied. She was a jewel, a treasure. One he always intended to keep close and safe and he didn't care if it took him a lifetime to convince her of his love, his faithfulness. He was never letting her go again. Not without one hell of a fight.

He gently placed his hand on her bare bottom and she flinched slightly, clearly expecting him to spank her.

"I bought you a toy," he said.

"A toy?"

He reached over to the bedside table and pulled open the drawer. He'd slipped his purchases in there earlier this morning after she'd gone down to the barn. He had planned to introduce her to this tonight but, as always, he couldn't keep his hands off her for more than a few hours at a time.

In the past month, he'd merely teased her with the idea of anal sex, tempting her with light touches, driving in a single finger to get her used to the idea and the feeling of being possessed there. Now he was ready to move things to the next level.

#### Mari Carr

"Spread your legs apart," he demanded. He opened a tube of lubrication and worked a generous amount into her ass with his finger. She tensed up for only a second as the cold gel hit her then, as always, her innate trust for him kicked in and she relaxed. He reveled in her faith in him. It was the one thing that had kept him going when things on the ranch began to overwhelm him. She believed in him. Always.

Once she'd accepted the first finger, he added a second and she hissed.

"How does that feel?" he asked as he worked the fingers into her firmly, scissoring them to stretch her tight muscles.

"It pinches...in a good way."

He grinned and removed his hand. She started to rise up and protest but he pushed her back down onto the bed. "Don't move. This will pinch even more...in a better way."

He slowly worked the butt plug into her. "Don't fight it. Relax and let it inside."

"What is it?" she whispered, trying to follow his directions.

"A butt plug. This is going to stretch you so it won't hurt when I claim your ass."

"It's too big," she said, and he chuckled.

"Spitfire, this is the small one. There are two more after this and none of them are as big as my cock."

She sighed and he was taken aback by the impression that, rather than upsetting her, she liked that thought. Once the plug was fully seated, he placed his hand back on her bottom.

"Are you riding any more today?" he asked.

"No. I'm going to help Bridget do a bit of harvesting in the garden. We're canning later this week."

"Good. I want you to leave this in all afternoon."

"Leave it in?" she asked. "I don't think—"

"You will leave it in. Now," he said, bending over to lift her. "Stand up."

She rose and stood awkwardly, trying to adjust to the plug in her ass. "How am I supposed to hide the fact that this thing is stuck in there?" she asked, and he laughed.

"We'll practice. Walk to the closet and get me a necktie. Then come back here."

"Rem," she started to protest, but he turned her away from him, swatting her twice on the ass.

She hissed and shivered and he began to suspect she was more turned-on than he'd ever seen her. His woman was nothing if not adventurous.

She moved to the closet more gracefully than he would have imagined and returned to hand him the necktie. "Planning a mid-week trip to church to pray forgiveness for your sins?" she asked.

She was a feisty little thing.

"Actually, I was planning to rack up a few more sins. Lie down in the middle of the bed on your back."

She crawled onto the high mattress on her hands and knees, treating him to a bird's-eye view of her new toy, and he had to adjust his jeans as his hard-on strained against the tight material.

As she lay down, he walked to the foot of the bed. "Open your legs," he demanded and she quickly assumed the position she knew he desired. With her knees spread apart and level with her hips, she watched as he drank in the beauty of her body. "Show me," he whispered and she reached down to hold herself open to him.

"Play with your clit," he said. "Pinch it. Get it nice and hard for me."

She toyed with the swollen nub as he shed his jeans and shirt. Moving onto the bed, he climbed over her, caging her beneath him with his hands, his knees between her outstretched legs. Taking her hands away from her pussy, he used the necktie to secure her hands together.

"What are you doing?"

"I've got an idea of how you can work off some of your angry aggressions," he said, pulling her bound hands above her and securing them to the headboard.

"What do you mean?"

"The next time you get pissed off and try to run to Stan's, I'm going to stop you and drag you here. I'm going to tie you to this bed and we're going to channel some of that pent-up, furious energy of yours."

Her hips lifted at his threat, clearly trying to find his cock. "You'll have to catch me first," she taunted.

"Don't you worry about that, spitfire. I will always catch you."

Moving his hands down to her hips, he lifted her pussy until it was lined up with his cock. She gasped at the feeling of his shaft claiming her cunt inch by inch, the small channel made tighter by the plug in her ass.

"Do you like that?" he asked. "Do you like having both your tight holes filled up?"
"Yes," she hissed. "God, yes."

He moved at a painfully slow speed, anxious to make this good for her, not willing to hurt her even the slightest bit. When he was fully seated, he paused and leaned down to kiss her hungrily.

"Untie me," she said, breathlessly. "I have to touch you. Have to."

He reached up to loosen the tie, wanting her hands on him and well aware that, now that she'd sampled a taste of bondage, she'd be back for more. Her innocent curiosity and desire to try anything left him feeling as if sex were new for him as well.

She attempted to lift her hips against him, willing him to take her the way she liked, hard and fast. Liv was a wildcat—and she was all his. He pulled back and moved in slowly again, dragging it out, touching all her hot spots as he returned.

She cried out, dragging her fingernails along his back. He winced, aware that those claw marks would sting later, but he could see she was too out of her mind to realize what she was doing. On his third retreat and return, he moved faster, harder, and he

felt the beginnings of her climax. Her legs tightened around his waist and as her orgasm claimed her, he held himself deep within her, letting her inner muscles caress his cock until he felt his balls draw up and he knew he had to fuck her or die. He gave himself up to the mindless bliss, thrusting in and out until she began to come again, this time taking him with her.

He bent down on his elbows, kissing her gently until she returned from the abyss. She smiled at him as he fell to the side, pulling her with him and careful to remain inside her, desperate for a few more connected moments.

She ran her hand along his face and kissed his cheek.

"Beats the hell out of Stan's," she whispered.

## **Chapter Four**

Rem leaned back in the office chair and sighed heavily. He studied the top of the desk, finally empty of the clutter that had covered it when he'd first come home. As he sat in the chair, he was struck by the impression that he was trying to fill his father's large shoes and for the millionth time, he wondered if his father would be proud of his efforts.

Then his thoughts drifted to Liv. He knew she still questioned his commitment to her. He could feel her holding a large part of herself back, away from him, afraid to offer her heart, her love to the man who'd left her alone for so many years. Night after night he held her, loved her, whispered the words he prayed would reassure her, convince her, but each morning she left their bed quiet, reserved, uncertain.

"I thought I heard you come in," Liv said from the doorway to the office. He glanced up to see her standing in a short skirt and tank top. He'd been home nearly two months and the image of her still caused his heart to skip a beat or two whenever she walked into the room.

"I just got in, I rode the property line with— Jesus, you look hot in that. Come in here and lock the door."

She giggled at his stern, demanding words but obeyed nonetheless. As independent and headstrong as she was out of the bedroom, Rem never ceased to be amazed by her willing submissiveness *in* the bedroom.

"You know, I might have to start giving some serious thought to making you an honest-to-God housewife. Keep you in those pretty skirts all day long."

She shrugged nonchalantly. "You're certainly welcome to try. So long as you don't have some big hang-up about failing miserably. Besides, so much for your theory of locking me in the house to keep me safe."

"What happened?" he asked.

"I burned my finger while Bridget and I were baking pies." She held her index finger out to him as she approached the desk and he chuckled.

"Oh well, by all means, go back to breaking in the new horses and stay the hell out of the kitchen. I had no idea it was so treacherous in there." He grasped her hand and kissed her sore finger before sucking the digit into his mouth seductively.

She laughed and pulled her hand away. "Sex, sex, sex," she said. "You are in serious danger of becoming terribly predictable, Mr. Bradley."

"Guess I'll just have to start incorporating more variety into our bedroom play."

"Shit. You incorporate too much more variety and I swear I'll spontaneously combust."

He narrowed his eyes at her naughty word, thinking her ready to do some of that combusting right now but she shook her head.

"Down boy," she teased. "What were you thinking about when I walked in?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that was a pretty heavy look on your face. Is something bothering you?"

He shook his head. He hadn't discussed his father since his first night home when Liv had confessed her guilt over driving him away. He hoped he'd convinced her that her feelings were unfounded and wrong. He and his father had been at odds since the first day he'd learned to talk back.

"It's nothing," he said, trying to figure out a way to evade the conversation. His misery had taken root this morning as he rode out and looked at his family's ranch and realized he'd let his father and Liv down in so many ways.

"Tell me," she pleaded, perching herself on the side of the desk.

He sighed. "Being back here has brought up a lot of memories of my dad. A lot of regrets I thought I'd learned to deal with."

"Regrets?" she asked, her eyes worried.

"Liv, I know you think you're to blame for the rift between me and Dad, but you couldn't be more wrong. For quite a few years, you eased the tension that was always between us. When you and Jeb moved in, things were quieter, easier."

"Until that summer," she whispered.

"I didn't leave because of that kiss. I'd been to the Marine recruiting office the week before. And I didn't leave because I was trying to get away from you. Well, not entirely for that reason. You *were* too young. After all we've done together in bed, I think you can understand why."

She blushed and he knew she'd caught his drift. His bedroom habits hadn't evolved much over the years. He'd always been a dominating bastard in the sack. It was a part of his makeup he'd given up trying to hide or make excuses for.

"Then why did you leave?" she asked.

"Because I was trying to get away from my dad. Trying to escape the heavy feeling of always being such a big disappointment to him."

"Disappointment?"

"Nothing I did was ever good enough for him. My grades in school were mediocre. He hated the whole idea of the rodeo as much as you do. Then I screwed things up with you and left for the Marines, leaving him to run the ranch alone, rather than working beside him the way a good son would have."

"A good son?"

He stopped talking and looked up at her, frustrated by her continual questions. "Are you going to keep repeating everything I say back to me?"

"I will until you start making some fucking sense," she shot back.

He narrowed his eyes but she poked him in the chest. "I don't give a shit about my damn gutter mouth right now. You've lost your mind, Rem. You honestly think your father wasn't proud of you every single day of your life?"

"Liv, I appreciate your comments, but the truth of the matter is—"

She exploded next to him and he reeled back to escape her wrath as she swung her fist toward him. "And all these years I thought Jeb was the dumbass! Wait here."

She disappeared out the office door and was gone for several minutes, leaving him to wonder what the hell he'd said to make her so angry. When she returned, she was carrying a large book.

"Where did you get that?" he asked when she placed the dusty thing on the desk in front of him.

"Your dad's room."

"What is it?" he asked.

"See for yourself," she replied, flipping open the front cover.

As Rem flipped the pages, he watched himself grow up again as he found every success in his life celebrated in the scrapbook his father had made for him. Pictures of his little league team holding the county trophy, all the ribbons and certificates he'd accumulated in too many damn years of 4-H and FFA, a picture of him at graduation, newspaper clippings of his results—good and bad—in the rodeos he'd participated in, a letter of merit from the Marines.

"And then there are these." Liv slapped a stack of letters in front of him, tied together neatly with string. "Every letter you ever wrote him. One letter, every two weeks, like clockwork. Joe waited for those letters like some folks wait for their next meal. He was hungry for them and when they arrived, he quoted from them chapter and verse to anyone who would listen to him. I've never seen a father more proud of his son."

"I didn't know. He never said —"

"Christ, Rem. You were never here more than a few days at a time and when you were, you went out and worked the ranch from morning to night like you had something to prove. Besides, it's not like your dad was the most affectionate guy in the world. I mean, that man loved me like I was his own daughter and I felt that emotion all

the way to the soles of my feet, but he never, ever said it. There are some things you just have to know, to feel, in here." She tapped his chest, directly over his heart.

Rem nodded, feeling as if he'd been run over by a train. His father had been proud of him, loved him. No one could look at this scrapbook and not feel that love.

"And I'll tell you something else," Liv said smugly. He fought back a grin at her too-pleased face. The woman loved to be right. "Your father knew you loved him too."

He frowned as he considered that fact. He'd never said those words either. Hell, he'd been a distant prick most of the times they were together. It was that fact he'd regretted most when he'd learned of his father's sudden death. "How did he know?"

"You wrote him letters, Rem. Twice a month for ten years. What son does that if he doesn't care for and respect his father? These letters were your way of showing him the things you couldn't say to his face. This scrapbook was his way of showing you."

"He loved me," he whispered, hearing the words and believing them for the first time in his life.

"Wanna know something else?" she asked.

"I'm not sure I can handle too many more of your amazing revelations today," he joked, feeling happier than he had in years.

"You can handle this one." She bent down to kiss his lips before kneeling between his legs.

"Liv?"

"I love you—and I want you," she whispered as she unzipped his pants and pulled out his cock. "Should I prove it to you? I mean, you seem to be big on visuals."

His brief spurt of laughter died the second she took him into her mouth, engulfing him to the back of her throat in two quick thrusts.

"Fuck," he muttered, his hands gripping her hair as she moved her lips, tongue and teeth against his hard flesh, working him to the brink of climax within moments.

"Not this way," he begged. "You. I have to be inside you."

She released him and grinned, rising to her feet. "Well, then hold on to your hat, cowboy, because we're going on a trail ride."

She lifted her skirt to her waist and he quickly discovered she wasn't wearing any panties. "Damn, baby. You are never getting your panties or jeans back."

She laughed as she straddled his lap, her legs hanging over the arms of the large office chair. He gripped her hips, pulling her into position, his head falling back as she slowly slid down on his erection.

He was only halfway in when he realized she was far tighter than she should be. "Liv?" His eyes narrowed as he moved his hands from her hips to the crack of her ass. His fingers found the thick butt plug lodged there and he groaned.

"Which plug is it, spitfire?"

"The big one," she whispered. He'd been personally filling her tight ass with the butt plugs daily, working to stretch her muscles.

"Dammit. You weren't ready for that yet," he said, his words ending with a moan as she sank two more inches onto his cock.

"I'm *so* ready for that," she said, kissing him as she pushed down, taking him into her completely.

He gripped her hips, planning to help her as she rode his cock, but his woman was a cowgirl, born and bred, and her years of riding bareback shone through. She moved on him like a seasoned rider and all too soon, he felt his climax threatening to erupt. She'd driven him to the boiling point with her mouth and now her sexy body had the kettle ready to blow.

"Aw dammit, Liv. I'm not going to last!"

"Thank God," she breathed against his cheek and he felt the first tremors of her climax begin. He let her drag him along, his hands digging into her hips, holding her tight against his cock as he came deep inside her, relishing the idea of filling her with

his come. Soon, he was going to beg her to stop taking birth control so he could fill her up with his baby as well.

She laid her head upon his shoulder as he wrapped her snugly in his arms. He suspected they both dozed for a few minutes. He felt her move against him and he realized he was still inside her. That thought awakened another part of him and he felt her grin against his neck.

"Predictable," she teased.

He pushed her back but when he didn't return her smile, hers quickly faded to one of concern.

"Rem?"

"You've been a very bad girl, Liv." He ran his hands along her ass and touched the end of the butt plug to drive home exactly what he was referring to.

She squirmed on his lap as he encircled her waist with his hands, lifting her off the chair.

"Take off that shirt and lean over the desk."

She quickly whipped the thin tank top off and bent over the smooth surface as he ran his hands along her bare flesh. "I didn't give you permission to use that butt plug. In fact, I seem to recall saying that you weren't to use the plugs at all unless I put them in. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," she replied.

He toed off his shoes and finished pulling off the pants she'd only shoved down as far as his knees. She started to turn and watch but he halted her movement with strong words.

"Face the front," he yelled in his Marine voice and she jerked back around.

He shrugged his T-shirt off as well before continuing to stroke her ass. He could see her bracing herself for his spanking and he didn't disappoint her. He moved fast, building up strength with each blow until she was panting and he could see her body's juices glimmering on her inner thighs.

"Whose body is this?" he asked, pausing and caressing her heated flesh.

"Yours," she whispered.

"I can't hear you," he said, leaning over to speak into her ear.

"Yours, cowboy," she said louder, her voice filled with her usual humor and spunk. God, she was perfect.

His hands traveled along the globes of her ass until he reached her opening. His fingers touched the base of the butt plug and she instinctively started thrusting back toward him.

He slapped her ass again, once, hard. "Hold still."

She stopped moving and he returned to the plug, gripping the base and slowly pulling it out. She groaned as he dragged the toy free.

"Did it hurt when you put it in?" he asked, certain it had. He'd been purposely taking her down this road slowly. Perhaps he'd been going too slowly.

"A little," she confessed.

"Well," he said, reaching into the desk drawer and pulling out a bottle of lubrication. She'd laughed at him when she discovered he'd stashed lubrication and toys in a variety of places around the house and ranch. Two months in her presence had taught him it paid to be prepared. His patience never seemed to last too long. "I have a feeling this is going to hurt a little bit more."

He pushed the tip of the lubrication into the tight ring of muscle and squeezed, making sure there was enough to keep his cock moving freely. He was certain he'd never be able to hold back once he got inside her ass.

Once again she tried to thrust back and, again, he halted her with a strong smack. "You've got to stop trying to direct this, Liv."

"I'm trying," she gasped. "But you need to hurry up."

He chuckled at her impatience. They were birds of a feather.

When he felt comfortable that he'd applied enough lube, he leaned over her and kissed her cheek lightly. "Ready?"

"God yes," she whispered.

He lined his cock up with her ass and slowly began to push inside. Several times he felt her tense up and he stopped, kissing the back of her neck, whispering words of encouragement in her ear until she relaxed and he moved forward once more. His arms trembled as he held himself above her, willing himself to move in gradual increments. He loved this position and he had no doubt once he'd taken her ass, he'd want it again and again. It was important to him that she liked it too.

Finally, his hips hit her ass and he sucked in a deep breath of air. She felt as heavenly as he'd known she would.

"Okay?" he whispered in her ear.

"Mmm," she hummed and he could see she was lost in that sensual place she sometimes drifted to.

"Still with me, spitfire?" he teased.

"Sort of," she joked. "I'm fairly certain I've got one foot in heaven though. If you'd move—just a bit—I think I could make the leap all the way in."

"I think maybe I could manage to get both of us there." He reached into the drawer once more and pulled out a tiny vibrator.

"What's that?" she asked when she felt his hand probing for the opening to her pussy. If he'd been thinking with his brain rather than his dick, he'd have put the vibrator in first.

"A surprise," he said as he found her cunt, wet and ready. He pushed the tiny device inside then grabbed up the remote. He pushed the button on low then gritted his teeth as the vibrations massaged his cock through the thin membrane separating him from the toy.

"Shit," he muttered, fighting the impulse to fuck her the way he wanted to.

Go slow. Dear God, let me be able to go slow.

"Move," she gasped as he fought against his body's natural instincts.

"Don't want to hurt you," he said through gritted teeth.

"Dammit, Rem. You're killing me! Fuck me!"

Her words released the demon in his soul and he pulled out only to thrust back in roughly. She screamed and he started to stop again until he realized her climax was already starting. He began a steady rhythm, refusing to let this end so quickly. He came into her as a steady stream of words flowed from his lips.

"Love you, baby," he said on one hard thrust. "Christ, I love you."

She moaned and he felt her begin to come again, her orgasms triggering continuously as he thrust over and over.

He pounded into her one last time as he turned the vibrator up to high. Her body trembled with the power of her final orgasm and he gave himself up to it.

"Fuck!" he muttered as his come jetted out in powerful spurts. "Goddammit, Liv. You're killing me, baby. Killing me. Shit, I love you."

For hours, days, hell maybe weeks, he lay above her, struggling to support his weight on weak arms, trying not to crush her into the hard surface of the desk.

She lay motionless beneath him and for a moment, he worried that he'd been too rough.

"Liv?" he whispered, feathering light kisses on her sweat-soaked back. They'd given each other quite a workout. She didn't reply. He pushed up and away from her, cursing the stiffness in his legs, his ass, everywhere. "Olivia?" he said, running his hand along her side, down to her waist.

"Ssh," she said. "Olivia Carter is officially dead. Killed by a gang of ruthless orgasms. The vicious fuckers attacked her from behind."

#### Mari Carr

He laughed until his sides hurt. He fell back into the desk chair to catch his breath and took a moment to enjoy the view of Liv sprawled out across his desk with her wellfucked and spanked ass at eye level.

She didn't move but he sensed her eyes were open.

"You're gloating, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yep," he replied cheerfully.

"You think my sore ass is funny?"

He laughed, recalling the fact she'd said the exact same thing the first night they'd slept together. The night she'd given him her virginity. "I think your sore ass is gorgeous. Can you get up off that desk?" he asked.

"Maybe...in a few weeks. Do you mind bringing me some food every now and again?"

"I think I know something that will help you move. I've got another surprise for you," he said, reaching back toward the drawer.

"Oh my God, any more of your surprises and I really will die."

He grinned and ran his hand along the back of her thigh. "You'll like this surprise and it doesn't involve sex at all."

"No sex?" she asked. "Hardly seems worth getting up for."

He shook his head and turned on his firm Marine voice. "Get up, Liv, and come here."

As always, she reacted to the tone. He noticed she was also feeling the effects of their hard lovemaking as she winced a couple of times before standing completely upright.

"I'll run a bath for you in a minute. I need to ask you something first."

She turned to face him. "How about bath first, question later?"

"No, this is important and I don't want to wait any longer."

As she stood before him, he slid off the chair and onto one knee. He heard Liv's quick intake of breath as he grasped her left hand in his. He flipped his right hand over the reveal the diamond engagement ring on his palm. "I love you and I want you to marry me, spitfire. I want to spend the rest of my life right here with you on this ranch. I want us to raise a brood of babies together and I want to die in your arms about a hundred years from now."

She smiled at his words and he thought for a moment he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. "I would love to marry you. I've never wanted to be with anyone but you. I love you, cowboy," she said, her voice hoarse with emotion.

He stood up and placed the ring on her finger. Leaning down, he kissed her gently. "You don't think two months is too soon to propose?"

She slapped him on the side of the head with a laugh. "Two months? Try ten years and two months, dumbass. You're just lucky you didn't keep me hanging on much longer. Another fifty years or so and I would have been out of here."

He laughed. "Damn, I was pushing it close to the wire. Glad I wised up in time. I love you, Liv."

"I love you too, Rem. I think I forgot to say this a couple of weeks ago, but welcome home."

He kissed her, holding her close, soaking in her scent and savoring the feeling of her soft body against his.

Some homecoming, he thought with a grin.

The End

### About the Author

Some people fall apart on their 30th birthday, others on their 40th. For Mari Carr, 34 was the year that took her down. After she spent the day crying and saying, "I haven't done anything I thought I would," her husband finally asked what was left undone. Her answer was simple—she hadn't written a book or decorated her house. "So do it," he said.

Five years later, the house is sparkling with fresh paint and new furniture and her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories and dead-ends. The lesson: It's never too late to achieve a goal or two!

High school librarian and English teacher by day and mother of two busy teenagers, Mari Carr finds time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3 a.m. and daybreak when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.

With the publication of her first book, her latest goal—publishing before 40—has been achieved with a couple of years to spare. Phew!

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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