

# *Evening Star*



*Rita Sable*

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*by Rita Sable*

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## CHAPTER ONE

"Lilly, stop fidgeting. Relax. *Smile*. C'mon ... stick your boobs out front where they belong. You gotta work for that tip."

Lilliana Wilcox straightened for a brief second, just long enough to scowl at her roommate from the mirrored wall of the express elevator. Glory opened a slender tube of bright red lipstick and carefully massaged it across the voluptuous curves of her heart shaped lips. Lilly stood in awe for a moment. She felt like a little brown duck standing beside an exotic black swan. A frightened-out-of-her-mind little duck who had no business being here in the first place.

Tonight was a one-time gig. She was completely out of her element. What the hell was she thinking to go along with Glory's plea?

Lilly groaned. "I can't believe I let you talk me into wearing this thing. I might as well be naked. I can't bend over without showing everyone my ass or having my boobs fall out. And where the hell did you get these sandals? My feet are killing me already and I've only been standing for a few minutes. I haven't even figured out how to walk in them without tipping over."

Glory pursed her glossy red lips and let her dark gaze wander up and down Lilly's body. "Yeah, doll," she snickered. "And with that cute ass and those yummy boobs of yours, you're gonna knock these boys down on their knees when you

walk out of this elevator tonight. C'mon, you want that big fat tip, right? You know you want that money."

"Don't call my ass 'cute' and don't call my boobs 'yummy'. It creeps me out. I want my own studio, Glory. For that I need this money. Otherwise, I wouldn't be humiliating myself like this tonight. And remember our deal. I'm *not* having sex with any of them." Lilly tugged down on the back of the dress. There was a cold draft coming up back there, a definite draft.

"*Stop fidgeting*. And here, put some of this on." Glory handed her the tube of lipstick.

"Ah, no thanks." Lilly wiggled in the dress one more time. "That is definitely not my color. I'm wearing lip gloss."

"Wouldn't know it, but suit yourself." Glory slid the tube back into her little purse. "But I gotta tell you, men love red lips on a woman. Your job tonight is to make them happy."

"Just as long as you remember our deal." Lilly still had a few precious moments to rearrange the barely-there dress before the elevator doors opened on the penthouse suite. She tugged defiantly at the low scrap of cloth that pretended to cover her breasts. The midnight blue, hand-beaded concoction came straight from Glory's closet. It was too-short-too-tight-too-low cut and she hated it on sight. Squeezing into it had been a lesson in contortionism. Glory might enjoy her 'job' as a high-priced escort and all the skimpy clothes that went with that territory, but Lilly most decidedly did not. She missed her faded jeans and cotton sweaters, and her favorite paint-splattered smock.

"Sure thing, doll." Glory smacked her hand against Lilly's ass. "Thanks for filling in tonight, I appreciate it. Just make them happy and you'll get your money. Call me if you need me to cover for you ... you know, if one of them gets to be more than you can handle. Now get ready; we're almost there. *Smile.*"

Lilly nodded and pasted a wide smile on her lips. If her cheeks didn't crack from the prolonged effort before the night was over, she'd consider herself lucky. She might be miserable, scared out of her wits too, but she knew it wouldn't do to look it. She had to pretend she was one of the full-time ladies of Easy Knight Escorts, and not just a temporary.

When the elevator doors whisked open on the privately owned, seventy-fifth floor penthouse suite, Lilly visualized the cool twenty-five hundred bucks, plus tip, that she'd earn in exchange for tonight's torture. It would be her rental down payment on a studio flat in Soho. A dream come true and the logical next step in her career as a landscape/architectural painter.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel Abendstern downed his third Glenlivet scotch in one swallow. It wasn't nearly enough to take the edge off his boredom. The restless energy that sizzled inside him hadn't been soothed yet either. He leaned against the long, polished mahogany and brass bar and motioned to one of the bartenders for another drink.

"Make it a double this time." At this rate, he'd need the whole bottle before the night was over.

The Millionaire Men's Club of uptown New York sponsored this little party tonight in celebration of their fortieth year. Gabe had arrived late. The only reason he agreed to be here at all was as his father's stand-in while he traveled abroad on business. George Abendstern was one of the club's founding fathers. And as New York City's famous media mogul's son and heir, Gabe had a responsibility to be here and give his father's speech for him.

But not for much longer. He counted the minutes on his white-gold dress watch until he could leave without appearing rude. The speeches had been given, the awards handed out, and now the celebratory mood bubbled over to pursuits of the flesh.

The mirror that graced the wall behind the bar served him well. He sipped his scotch, nursing the rich, numbing heat that slid down his throat and warmed his gut. Scanning the room full of familiar faces, he figured at age thirty-two he was the youngest man here tonight.

All twenty of these men were his father's age, most of them married. Wives and girlfriends had been discreetly left behind. The mirror gave him a perfect view of the other men strutting and preening like peacocks around the high-priced hookers hired for late night entertainment. The women arrived by way of private elevator, dressed to seduce and made quick work of mingling. They touched, leaned and smiled their availability. They knew their jobs. Not for the first

time, Gabe wondered which club member's idea it had been to hire them?

It was obvious most of these men would be wandering off for a quick fuck in one of the back bedrooms. Judging by the hungry looks they cast his way he could have any of these women, or more than one at a time if he wanted that sort of thing. Neither of which appealed to him. A quick fuck was for teenagers experimenting in the back seat of daddy's car. Or for these aging, rich peacocks who panted around the ladies with their dicks practically hanging out of their tuxedo pants—trying to prove they could still get it up and hammer away.

His attitude had changed over the past couple years. He was no longer satisfied with one-night stands. His body still craved sexual release, more strongly than ever, and he always grew hard at the sight of a beautiful woman. But now he wanted a deeper connection with a woman, a real attraction for her not only physically, but on an emotional and soul-deep level.

He wanted his soul mate.

Gabe knew these things existed. His own parents had had such a connection, until his mother's untimely death five years ago.

He smiled. Mom's warmth, compassion and joy had graced their lives and she shared it freely with everyone she knew. His younger sister, Megan, had already found and recently married the man of her dreams. She was incredibly happy. Knowing that made Gabe happy. She took after Mom in so many ways and deserved the love that her husband, Scott, showered her with.



After another long swallow of scotch, he decided that whatever his dad did here with his 'friends' during his own time was his own damned business. Was it fair to expect his father to remain faithful to a dead woman? The thought gnawed on his stomach and churned the scotch he swallowed. Perhaps that was the reason Dad chose to pass up this function and travel overseas now. If he knew these hired women would be here, did he not want any part of it?

One hopeful hooker sauntered toward Gabe now, her heavily made-up eyes determined to hold his attention. She had a pair of impossibly perfect tits and spiky red hair. He gave her a polite smile in the mirror and finished his scotch.

Miss Perfect Tits ran her long nails slowly up his back until they met the black satin collar of his tuxedo jacket. Was it the finely aged scotch he consumed so recklessly, or the soft, insistent pressure of her ample, round breasts against his shoulder that made his cock jump?

"Hey, sweetie," she cooed into his ear. "You look lonely."

Her perfume filtered through the scotch afterburn that lingered in his nose and on his tongue, promising a musky, dark sensuality. He preferred lighter, more floral perfumes on his women, or none at all. She wasn't his type, but, *hell*, maybe a quick fuck would do him good.

He frowned. When was the last time he had great sex with Amanda? Even after exclusively dating her for more than six months, she still insisted he wear a damned condom every time. It didn't matter that she was on the pill; the natural messiness of sex grossed her out. Especially if he spilled cum on her pristine thighs or tummy. She kept asking him about

taking their relationship one step further, toward marriage. Even his father pestered him about that.

Truth was, he couldn't fathom a life with Amanda any more than he could cut off his own arm. He needed to find a good way to break it off with her. And the trouble with simply doing that was that she was the daughter of his father's best friend. He could feel the conspiracy and subtle pressure to marry Amanda. George Abendstern was getting older, and he wanted his son married, with children.

"Evenin', ma'am." Gabe slipped into the drawl he'd rebelliously adopted long ago. He spun around to face Miss Perfect Tits and leaned his elbows back on the bar.

She didn't try to hide the fact she found him attractive and ran her tongue over bright white teeth. "Mmm, you're not from around here, are you, big boy?"

"Born and raised, I'm afraid. But I don't live in this city any more than I have to. I'll be headin' home tomorrow morning."

"Yeah? And where's home?" Miss Perfect Tits dragged her red-tipped fingernail across his lapel and slipped past the buttons of his white silk shirt. When her finger touched his chest, he was surprised to find it annoying, not arousing.

He wasn't attracted to her and he couldn't fuck her no matter how much his body ached for it. "Home is a little place outside Billings, Montana."

She blinked heavily mascaraed lashes. "Montana? I've never met anyone from there. Didn't know people actually lived there. What brings you to the city?"

Her forced seduction and lame effort at conversation set his teeth on edge. It was time to get rid of her. "Driving," he lied smoothly. "I'm the chauffeur for that man over there."

"Oh." Her blatantly seductive attention stopped cold. "I didn't know. I thought you were one of them."

"Sorry, hon'. But don't feel like you have to quit what you were doing." He gave her his best, lusty grin.

Miss Perfect Tits smiled sympathetically and waved goodbye with a flash of her red fingertips. "Sorry, sweetie. You don't have what I want. See ya'."

He watched her wiggle her way over to the next available man and hook her arm securely into old Roger Hughes', the owner of this fancy penthouse. Roger's bushy white eyebrows jumped with delight to find her soft, ripe body pressing into his. At least Roger wasn't married—right now. He hoped the old geezer had a good time fucking Miss Perfect Tits tonight.

Gabe turned back to the bar and glanced down at his watch. *Shit*, only ten minutes had passed by. After a nod, the bartender walked back with the bottle of Glenlivet already poised for a pour into his glass.

"I'll just take the bottle." He reached over and took it out of the bartender's hand. "Thanks."

He headed for the outdoor terrace, away from these horny old men and the women who aimed to please them for a little bit of their money. After he finished the last half of this bottle, in private, he'd leave.

The night greeted him with playful wisps of cool, late spring air. Huge potted plants stood like sentinels along the terrace perimeter wall, their leaves fluttering and quaking on

the wind. The sound of the city surrounded him; it was alive and vibrant. *And so fuckin' noisy.* He looked up into the sky while he walked and could barely make out any of the stars. Damned bright city lights flooded them out. Even the half moon seemed dimmer than normal.

At home, the velvet night sky stretched infinitely overhead, spread out like a blanket of brilliant stars. He loved seeing them, to marvel at their mystery and beauty. His longing for the ranch reminded him how irritated and restless he was with this overlong visit to New York.

Gabe wandered over to the perimeter wall to look down at the busy city streets. That's when he noticed he wasn't as alone as he'd hoped. A woman stood behind one of the potted plants near the wall. She hugged her arms tightly against her slim, curvy body. Even in the dark, he could tell she was shivering from the cool night air. Shoulder length chestnut hair kissed the tops of her pale, bare shoulders and danced on the flirty evening breeze while she stared down at the city scene below.

All of his senses grew suddenly alert. He moved over to get a better look. That dress, *damn!* It hugged her like a second skin. Instantly he wished it was his skin that molded over her curves and hugged that sweet, round little ass. She had a long pair of legs too, lightly muscled and sleek. Her feet were bare. He raised an eyebrow at the stiletto sandals cast off nearby.

Gabe grinned. Obviously, the pain of those killer shoes was worse than having her toes freeze solid on the cold marble tiles. What was she doing out here alone? Was she trying to

hide from the horny goats inside? That was a mighty stupid thing for a hooker to do.

"You're not thinking of jumping, are you?" he asked half in jest.

She let out a little squeak of surprise and turned so quickly he saw her wobble toward the edge. He dropped the scotch and caught her around the waist, pulling her away from the wall. The bottle hit the tiles with a loud 'pop' and shattered. Glass shards bounced off the back of his pants and littered the floor with a tinkling warning.

"Damn," he swore, drawing her closer. "That was a mighty fine scotch, too."

She was taller than any woman he'd ever held so close and fit him perfectly from hip to chest. Elegant, slender hands pressed against the wall of his chest, burned through his shirt and seared him like a branding iron on a calf's hide. He liked the way she stared back at him. There was defiance and just a hint of temper sparkling in her eyes. What color were they? Hard to tell in the dusky light, but he suspected they were deep blue. Smoky blue, hot and angry, framed by silky lashes. She had a slim, round-tipped nose and kissable, naturally full lips. Pale, no lipstick. Not the cosmetically over-plumped lips that women thought all men found so attractive.

Desire for her slammed into him, tightening his groin. His cock eagerly thrust up against the softness of her belly. After a moment of staring at him, her eyes growing wider with every inch he expanded, she squirmed and tried to push away.

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He'd never felt such hot, thick hunger for a woman he'd just met before. No way was she getting away from him now that he had her.

"Whoa there, sugar," he said softly against her struggles. "Don't move. There's glass all over the place and you aren't wearing your pretty shoes."

## CHAPTER TWO

"Let go of me!"

Lilly tried again to push away from this too-sexy man who suddenly appeared out of the dark. She'd been so preoccupied with calming the inner demons stalking her memory that she hadn't heard him approach. He tightened his arms and pulled her closer into the warmth of his impressive, powerful body.

Too close. She felt every inch of him where their bodies connected. Especially the hard bulge pushing against her belly. Was it ... *growing*? He couldn't be aroused, could he?

He shook his head, a slow grin spreading across his mouth. Two dimples appeared in his cheeks, just above the hard line of his jaw. Lordy! This was one tall, handsome hunk of man—much younger than the old geezers inside.

*And probably more dangerous because of it.*

Dark hair slicked back from a broad, tanned forehead. A few glossy wisps rebelled and brushed down over his eyebrows with errant playfulness. Hazel eyes, glittering with light reflected from the surrounding city studied her face with a hungry look.

It was pretty clear he thought she was one of the escort ladies hired to work this party. And he wanted her. That thick hardness he pressed into her belly sent a thrill chasing into her blood and straight down to start a slow ache inside her pussy. Just as fast, adrenaline lashed out at her nerves like

the flick of a whip. No doubt about it, this man scared the crap out of her.

Lilly tried pushing away from him again. She was *not* having sex with any man here ... no matter how hot he looked. God, what had she been thinking when she slipped out here to avoid being pawed by the men inside?

"I'm not lettin' go of you." His silky drawl sent delicious tingles skittering straight from her ears and all the way down to her toes. "Like I said, the floor is covered with broken glass. My fault, I'm afraid. I dropped my scotch to rescue you."

"What?" Lilly stood up on her tiptoes and looked around at the sparkling, dangerous glitter all around them. "I didn't need rescuing, dammit! Now, would you mind handing me my shoes?"

His teeth flashed within a self-assured, seductive smile. "You don't need 'em. I'm still wearing mine."

He scooped his arms beneath her legs so fast she had no time to object. Her hands swung up and grabbed onto broad shoulders. Beneath the silk of his tuxedo jacket she felt the potent play of muscles under her fingertips. He was tight and solid and he carried her effortlessly to safety.

Being five feet ten inches tall, she couldn't remember being carried like this since she'd been a child. Once she settled somewhat stiffly in his arms, his grin turned possessive. He cradled her softness against his chest and brought his mouth down to hers—close, but not quite touching.



"You don't need to carry me," she objected. "I think it's safe to put me down over there."

"Oh, but I want to, sugar." His warm breath brushed across her face. "And I think you're just what I need tonight."

"I think you're drunk," she shot back. He smelled of high-priced, toasty liquor and something else—she couldn't tell exactly what. Like spicy soap, leather and sunshine—a clean, outdoorsy smell.

"Not nearly drunk enough to let a beautiful woman like you get away." His eyes danced with mischief.

*Oh, dear God*, that voice—deep and sexy, like a long, slow lick across her ears and right into her bloodstream. This man oozed sexual prowess. She shivered at the prospect and promise of his words. Her one and only disastrous attempt at a relationship hadn't prepared her for the likes of this man. Craig had been cruel and abusive at best. He never made her feel the way this man did—tight, tingly, wet. Undeniably feminine.

And extremely vulnerable.

"Well, um," Lilly began, and then swallowed the dryness in her throat. "I know you think I'm one of the ladies here tonight. But I'm not. I'm just working to fill in for a friend. I'm not a ... ah ... professional."

"Whatever you say, sugar." His grin never faltered as he carried her over to a wicker seating area, far from the broken glass. Amusement played at the corner of one fine, chiseled lip.

"Thanks, but my name's not 'sugar' and you can put me down now. I don't think there's any glass all the way over here."

Ignoring her plea, he inspected the furniture and then chose the large wicker couch, leaning back against the overstuffed pillows. Before she realized what he intended he'd settled her across his lap so that her spine pressed against his chest and her bare legs draped on either side of his.

Lilly immediately squirmed to get off him. He clamped one large hand around her waist, below her breasts straining to escape her borrowed dress. He slid his other hand over the exposed skin of her thigh. She gasped at the sudden intimacy of his touch and grabbed for his thick wrist, trying to pull him loose.

"Hey! I told you I'm not one of them."

"Take it easy." His voice was gentle, but firm against her ear. "Where do you think you're going? You're about as skittish as a newborn filly."

"A what? Dammit, let me up." His legs were longer than hers; her feet couldn't touch the floor. The already-too-short dress inched up her thighs and threatened to give him a good eyeful of her black, thong panties.

She stiffened. Her attraction to him didn't mean she would be having sex with him now. She was *not* one of the professionals available for that tonight. He'd better get it through his handsome head that her body was not for sale. Admittedly she wasn't doing the job she'd been hired for, since she'd slipped away from the men she was supposed to

be making happy with the simple pleasure of her charm and wit.

Ha! She had no idea what to say to any of them anyway. They made it pretty damn clear the moment she introduced herself that they didn't care if she had two brain cells in her whole head. They leered at her breasts, groped her butt, and ... grossed her out. She was just another hired vagina to them. How could Glory do this all the time? Granted, the money was outrageous. And Lilly desperately needed that money.

Now, she'd been caught by one of them. His fingers rested beneath the swell of her left breast, burning through the thin fabric. Her nipple tightened in response. She bit back a moan. She wasn't wearing a bra, and no doubt about it—he could tell. His other hand toyed on her inner thigh, making slow circles up and up, a few torturous inches from the wet, aching center between her legs. She fidgeted against the firm, steely rod beneath her buttocks and the arousing caress of his callused palm on the super sensitive skin of her inner thigh.

"You're so soft," he murmured against her neck, nuzzling through her hair. "So, what's your name?"

He licked her neck. Goose bumps popped out across her skin. Thoughts of fleeing vanished like a dust bunny sucked up into a vacuum cleaner. She leaned back against his chest. His warmth and sexy smell lured her sensibilities into one innocuous lump and tossed them into oblivion. Damn, this man moved fast.

"I'm Li ... oh! I, uh, I'm not supposed to give out my real name. Call me Lisa."

His chuckle vibrated against her throat, sending her goose bumps into double time. She shivered with delight under his hot tongue as he trailed it from her neck down to the curve of her shoulder.

"Nice to meet you, *Lisa*. I'm Gabriel." He thumbed her nipple through the thin fabric with an experimental touch at first. It puckered; his strokes firmed and lit a torch of fire inside her body. Another shy moan escaped her lips.

*God, I shouldn't be doing this. But it feels so good...*

"Well, lovely *Lisa*," he continued, playing her nipple like a harp string and sending shivers pounding through her blood. "The way I see things, you're being paid to make the gents happy tonight, am I right?"

Lilly gasped, suddenly aware of how hot his talented, searching fingers were. "No, I'm not. I mean, yes, but not for that. I'm just filling in for a friend. But I'm not one of them. Really."

"No? So, what's a pretty thing like you doing here tonight if you're not being paid for this body?" He nipped her earlobe then swirled his tongue along the edge. "And don't tell me you're filling in for this fictitious friend of yours. No real friend would bring you up here to be snacked on by these horny, old goats. It's a good thing I found you first."

His hand settled firmly in between her thighs. In one bold stroke, he slid past the tiny piece of satin that covered her pussy. His finger speared through her curls and into slick, creamy heat.

"Oh, my God..." Lilly gasped. Her whole world stopped when he glided past the wet lips of her pussy and found her

throbbing clit. With an expert, light touch, he massaged the tiny nub to the peak of hardness. He dipped his finger into the tender opening of her vagina and used her own juices to lubricate and slide across her aching flesh. Zaps of electric heat flickered through her belly. Mindless with desire now, she arched into his hand, instinctively searching for more—needing, craving deeper penetration.

That confident, sexy chuckle sounded in her ear again when he answered her quest and slipped two fingers deep inside her. She sucked in another breath when he gently stretched and probed her. He used his thumb to maintain a delicious pressure on the sensitive bud of her clit, at the same time he stroked his fingers in and out of her swollen, molten flesh.

“Damn. You are so tight,” he growled against her neck. “How long’s it been since you had a man inside you?”

Lilly panted and twisted her hips against his fingers. His words sounded like they came from another room, another county. He brushed across the top of her dress and freed her breasts. He cupped one, stroked his fingers around in a spiral and then rolled her nipple between his thumb and finger. Curls of pure delight snaked through her body. She bit down on her lip to quiet the little mewling sounds of approval she heard herself making.

“That’s it, sugar,” he whispered his encouragement. “Your body was made for this. Ride it, take what you need.”

Her orgasm came fast. It built up at the base of her spine with a small spark and exploded through her body like a Fourth of July firecracker. The most intense, pleasurable heat

washed over her in wave after luscious wave. She shuddered and bucked against his fingers, whimpering from the tremors he created deep inside her slick sheath.

She lay like a limp rag doll against him, breathing hard. The strong beat of his heart thundered against his chest. His firm arousal pulsed like a wild, caged creature against her bottom. She opened her eyes to the reality of the situation and fought to calm her racing pulse and gather her wits about her again. What had she done? She'd allowed a strange man she'd only met to finger-fuck her to the best orgasm of her life!

Even now, he stroked her hot flesh. He brought his fingers up to his mouth and tasted the cream from her cunt that coated his fingers with glistening wetness. Her eyes went wide with shock.

"Mmm, so sweet. You taste like fresh, sweet cream. So good I want more."

"Wha ... what?" Lilly stammered. Shame slammed into her mind, along with the first inkling of fear. She cringed and pulled her legs up, cradled her arms across her exposed, tingling breasts.

He would make fun of her now. He would berate her for how loose and easy she'd been. Then he would begin to torture her. Craig had done that. He said it was normal and demanded her pain after sex. It was the only way he could ejaculate—when she cried out from the pain he enjoyed inflicting on her body.

Afterwards he would cuddle and soothe her tears. It was supposed to make her feel better—until the next time he wanted her body for his release.

*Never again!*

Lilly bolted off his lap. Caught off guard, he sat there with his arms out, a questioning look of dazed lust riding hard inside dark, glittering eyes. The evidence of his long, thick cock pressed against the outline of his pants with unmistakable clarity.

"Where're you going, sugar?"

She had to escape him. Now! She couldn't be trapped into being tortured again. Panic filled her mind; a cold, unrelenting grip that quickly squashed the pleasure she'd experienced in his capable arms. Nothing mattered except escape. Escape from the incredible hurting and humiliation she knew, and expected, would come now. She backed up toward the terrace door while she tugged the dress into some semblance of decency.

"I ... ah, I remembered I have to meet someone. I have to go."

He stood up in one slow, smooth motion like a hungry lion rising from the tall grass with a lone gazelle pinned in his sight. Lilly glimpsed the slightest hint of anger. That was all she needed to spur her backwards even faster. She would not give him the chance to hurt her.

"Who?" He sounded jealous. "Come on back here. Let's finish what we started."

"This was a mistake. Oh, big mistake," she mumbled.

"Why?" He cocked his head and looked at her curiously. "I enjoyed that as much as you did. So, what are you afraid of?"

Her breath hitched when he stepped toward her again, one hand stretched out, palm up. Her nerves skittered with warning and set her limbs to trembling.

"Just stay back! You don't understand. I'm not one of them." Lilly took another couple of careful steps away. He followed, watchful dark eyes narrowed suspiciously at her retreat.

"Look, I'm not sure I understand everything that's going on here, but you gotta' believe me when I say I won't hurt you. I'm not that kind of man."

A strangled cry escaped her throat, sounding like a wounded animal to her own ears. "Sorry, but I really have to go now."

Lilly spun around and darted through the terrace door into the noisy, crowded penthouse. With a quick flick of her wrist, she locked it behind her. His handsome face appeared on the other side of the glass only seconds later, wearing a puzzled expression.

She looked around anxiously. Club members and the ladies of Easy Knight Escorts mingled in small groups, laughing, drinking, some of them snuggling together on the couches and lounge chairs scattered around the main room. She didn't see any sign of Glory. Perhaps she was...

Lilly pushed that thought from her heated mind. Whatever her roommate did on the job was her own damned business! As far as Lilly was concerned, they could keep her fee. She wanted out of this madhouse and back to the quiet safety of



her paints and canvases. She'd figure out another way to earn the money for the studio flat.

She backed up from the door, her eyes locking with his through the glass. She mouthed the word again, 'Sorry'. Thankfully, nobody paid any attention to the furious man on the other side of the terrace door. She walked away, barefoot and as calmly as possible. He banged his palm against the frame of the terrace door. She cringed at the rattling threat of his demand.

With one last look at his gorgeous, angry face, she spun away. He'd given her a gift tonight. But she could never see him again. Tears blurred her vision and his image melted inside them. Then she fled toward the elevator and disappeared.

## CHAPTER THREE

Lilly huddled on the couch, sipping from a mug of steaming coffee while the local TV anchor doled out the day's prerequisite of bad news. Whatever he said, she didn't hear it. She hit the mute button and watched in silence. The graphic images floating across the screen were enough. Her vivid imagination could take over from there.

Down the short hallway in the apartment she shared, a door opened. Glory stumbled out into daylight. Her wild, curly black hair was mussed from sleep and she squinted in disgust at the bright light of day streaming in from the living room window.

"Damn, Lilly." Glory yawned loudly and scratched her flat belly under a purple satin nightie. "What are you doing up already?"

Lilly sipped again, stalling. "Couldn't sleep. But I'm not inspired enough to start working."

Glory moved across to the kitchen, holding her hand up to block against the glaring sunlight that washed over her face. "Did you get home okay last night? I didn't see you after about an hour."

"Yeah, fine," Lilly lied. "A cab was waiting right at the door, so I didn't have to flag one down."

She kept her attention focused on the TV. Glory was highly perceptive and she didn't want any questions about last night. The memory of that gorgeous man's hands on her flesh sent tingles of delicious aftershocks racing through her body. And

the erotic dreams that followed hadn't allowed her to forget his expert touch either. Instead they left her restless and empty, moaning in her sleep with a void she didn't quite understand how to fill.

Glory poured coffee into another mug, carried it over to the couch and curled up her long, satiny-dark legs. "You didn't piss anyone off, did you?"

"No. They were all nice enough, I guess. Some a bit more drunk than others, but nobody got upset if I moved on without them." The lie burned in Lilly's throat and threatened to curdle the hot coffee inside her stomach. She blew out a nervous breath across her mug.

"Good. 'Cuz one of them, a really good lookin' stud, got locked out on the terrace and holy shit ... was he mad. He kept asking for some girl named 'Lisa'. It took a while 'til he calmed down enough to give a description of her. He wanted her bad. Really bad."

Lilly's breath hitched. "Did anyone find her for him?"

"Nope." Glory took another appreciative sip and smacked her full lips together. "But he had her shoes. And they were awfully pretty sandals. I'm gonna miss them."

"*Oh my God.*" Lilly coughed and spilled coffee down the front of her faded, oversized NY Giants sleep shirt. She set her mug down, plucked the wet fabric off her chest and ran to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

She leaned her forehead against the cool, cheerful yellow tiles on the wall opposite the toilet. A sickening combination of fear and nausea coiled like a spring ready to pounce from her stomach. Bile slapped the back of her tongue. In her

panic to escape him last night, she'd forgotten all about Glory's new sandals.

A soft knock sounded on the bathroom door. "You okay in there?"

"Yeah," Lilly groaned, breathing deeply past her nausea. She opened the door a crack and smiled weakly at Glory's sympathetic dark eyes. "I'm sorry, I couldn't stick around after he ... he tried to seduce me ... out there last night. I couldn't do it. I panicked and the only thing I thought of was getting as far from him as possible. Or else I would have puked in his lap and ruined his tux. That would have really pissed him off."

"Oh, I dunno, doll. He looked pretty upset that you got away. Was he rough? Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "He was actually very gentle. And handsome ... but he scared me. I just couldn't do it. All those memories came back and hit me all at once. I'm so sorry."

Glory sighed. "It's okay, I took care of it. Nobody knew it was you, and none of the other girls recognized you. You did the company and me a big favor. You'll get paid. Don't worry about that. But I'm keeping your tip so I can buy a new pair of Manolo's. I didn't even get a chance to wear them!"

"Fair enough," Lilly grinned weakly. "Thanks for covering my tracks, girlfriend. I'm sorry about your sandals."

"Forget it. The look on your face when I told you, I thought you were gonna pass out. You sure you don't wanna tell me what happened between you and that guy, what's his name? Greg?"

"Craig." Lilly took a deep breath. "No, I don't want to talk about him. He's dead. I've talked about it to Dr. Morrison until I'm blue in the face. Now I have to keep going."

Glory reached up, pushed the bathroom door open wide and swept her hand across Lilly's cheek. "I understand. You do what you have to. Poor baby doll ... not all men are like that monster. You believe that, don't you?"

Lilly could only stare, her mind whirling with flashes of pain from Craig's brutality and the intense, fast pleasure she'd experienced from the stranger last night. How could they be so different?

"I'm not sure," she finally managed. "I've only known Craig ... he was my first. And last."

Glory made a clucking sound with her tongue. "That's just not right, not at all. What did the stud-muffin last night do to you? Did you like it?"

Heat rushed into Lilly's cheeks. "Hey, I know you don't mind sharing your sexual escapades with everyone, including me, but ... I don't. I can't talk about that!"

"Why not? It's perfectly natural. Sex is *good*, doll. You haven't had the right man to show you how good."

"Glory Jacobs, I'm not you. I'm a simple girl from a small farm in Ohio who at the moment is barely one notch away from being a real starving artist. I don't get paid to ... to ... entertain men. I'm not sultry and gorgeous and confident around them like you are."

"Uh-uh, not buyin' it. Tell me what the guy last night did to you. Did he kiss you?"

"Almost, but no."

"Did he ... fondle your breasts?" She reached out and cupped long fingers under the full swell of Lilly's left breast.

Lilly swatted Glory's hand away. "Yes, and stop that. I don't swing both ways. You know that."

Glory smiled like a cat with fresh cream on her whiskers. "You liked it, the way he touched your breasts, didn't you?"

"Yes, *dammit*." Heat flushed Lilly's face. "Is that all you want to know? Because I need to get a shower and start working. *If* you're done interrogating me?"

"Did you fuck him? Or just suck his cock?"

"*What?*" Lilly practically screeched in denial. She crossed her arms over her chest, shielding her hardening nipples from Glory's view. "No. Neither."

Glory shook her head, her untamed curls bouncing across her shoulders. "For him to be that upset, you did something to him. He had a class A, cast-iron erection. Even I could see it from the other side of the room. Damn, doll-face, you got him good. What did he do besides touch your breasts? Did he ... finger your clit?"

Lilly could not contain her gasp. Moisture pooled between her legs and soaked the crotch of her cotton panties. The memory of strong, gentle fingers pressed deep inside her hot, aching flesh made her quiver with sudden need.

"Ah," Glory said, smiling with sly, feminine knowledge. "You liked that. Very good. Now I know you're not frigid when it comes to sex. You've been mistreated by one stupid asshole. Would you like to see this guy from last night again, if he asked for you?"

"No!" Lilly said too quickly. "God, no. I don't want to see any man—especially not one who practically had his way with me and I can't even remember his name. That's not something I do."

"I know, doll. But if you change your mind, I got his name. Don't you even wanna know who the big fish is that you hooked?"

"No, I don't." Lilly raked her nails through her hair with painful strokes to help straighten her thoughts. "I don't want to see him, or any other man for that matter. I've got too many things to do to get involved with some guy who..."

Glory finished Lilly's trailing sentence. "Who ... made you hot and wet? A guy who had such a hard-on for you that it had to be killing him? Look, he has no clue who you really are and knows nothing about you. I'll keep it that way. Okay?"

"Yes," Lilly sighed. "Just forget it, all of it."

Glory held up three of her manicured fingers. "Consider it forgotten, girlfriend's honor. Now get your shower. I'm going back to bed until lunchtime."

\* \* \* \*

A constant pounding inside his skull and the alarming, shrill scream of police sirens finally woke Gabe from a restless sleep. His mouth felt like he'd dragged his tongue through the gutters of this filthy city. God, how he hated New York.

Lying naked and face down across the bed in the guest room in his father's plush Central Park apartment, he managed to drag his body upright so that he could slap the

button on the wall. The window closed automatically with a soft whirring sound.

The obnoxious noise of the streets below quieted to a constant but tolerable hum. He rolled over onto his back and took several long breaths. Had his cock been at attention all damned night long? The ache in his balls threatened to burst if he didn't give himself some release. He rubbed his hands across the silky sheets. Thankfully, he hadn't cum with a wet dream while he slept. He wasn't in the mood to strip the bed and toss everything into the washing machine this morning before the maid came in.

It was all her fault. *Lisa*. He knew it wasn't her real name. She was a classy hooker and she haunted his every thought. In his dreams, he'd fucked her ten ways till Sunday and then, started all over again. He couldn't get enough of her smell—like dew-covered wildflowers in a meadow. It had to be her own natural perfume, not something expensive from Neiman Marcus. No woman had ever smelled so good to him before.

What amazed him even more, was that a few seconds of being near her and he'd completely forgotten about his sort-of commitment to Amanda.

Holding Lisa in his arms and carrying her close to his heart had felt so natural, like she belonged there. His fingertips itched with the memory of her soft, full breasts in his hands. They were big enough to fill his palms with luscious weight. Her nipples had hardened immediately, becoming firm nubs as he stroked them. Ah, hell, he didn't even get the chance to taste them.



The feel of her adorable little ass riding his crotch, with her legs spread wide open beneath his hand, giving him access to probe and explore the incredibly hot, silky softness of her woman's flesh. *Sweet Jesus*, he burned for more! The taste of her cunt juices was branded on his tongue forever. All it took was one taste from the finger he dipped into her slick core and he knew he'd never forget her unique, sweet tangy taste, like red honey and lemons. He never wanted to suck a woman's slit so bad in his life, to thrust his tongue deep inside and lap up her creamy nectar like a starving man.

He certainly hadn't expected her to jump off his lap like a frightened rabbit. Especially not after the way she responded to him and climaxed so quickly, her inner muscles trembling and squeezing his fingers. He could barely think coherently from the need to plunge his cock deep into her hot body.

Damn her! Why'd she freak out like that? She actually looked scared enough to throw up if he so much as reached for her again.

*Some fucker had hurt her bad.* The fear flickering inside her gorgeous eyes was real—a tangible, recent thing that had obviously traumatized her. What the hell was she doing working as a whore?

He aimed to find out. Gabe swung his legs over the bed and reached for his cell phone. He spent several frustrating seconds scrolling through his phone book until he found the number he wanted: Steve Meredith, P.I., an old high school buddy known for being discreet and thorough. If Steve couldn't dig up the dirt, nobody could. He punched the button and waited impatiently while Steve's cell phone rang.

Voicemail answered. Gabe scrubbed a hand through his hair in frustration and waited for the beep.

"Hey, buddy, it's Gabe here. I need a favor. Shouldn't take you long. Find out anything you can about the Easy Knight Escort service. In particular, if they have a lady by the name of Lisa. No last name. I'm sure it's an alias, but you never know. Call me on my cell when you find something out. I'm changing my plans and flying home tomorrow. Thanks. I owe you one."

He clicked off his cellular phone and tossed it back onto the night stand. A shaft of warm sunlight stabbed through the curtain and rested on his throbbing cock. He hated jacking off. But going over to Amanda's for a morning romp in the sack wouldn't cut it. She wasn't receptive to unplanned sex, especially not first thing in the morning. He couldn't wait until tonight to ease the discomfort standing straight up between his legs.

Besides, it wasn't right. He'd be thinking of Lisa's hot, receptive body while trying to bring Amanda to one of her belated, dainty orgasms.

Groaning in defeat, he wrapped his fingers around his aching shaft and used the slippery drop of pre-cum to lube himself. He leaned back on the bed and thought of all the things he wanted to do to Lisa last night. A few short strokes were all it took to bring himself to one of the strongest orgasms he ever remembered.

When the last drop of hot, sticky semen shot over the planes of his abs, he felt mildly sated. Until noon ... maybe. He got up and headed for the shower, wondering what the

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hell was taking Steve so long to call back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Four months later...*

Lilly entered the bustling lobby area of the Abendstern Media Corporation building in downtown Manhattan. She walked briskly over to the double row of elevators. People crowded around, ears pinned to cellular phones, eyes glued to the number dots indicating the location of each elevator inside the vertebra of this huge building. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves, and relaxed her death-grip on the leather handle of her portfolio.

The elevator slid open and people poured out. She stepped inside with five others and pressed the button to the sixtieth floor.

In a few minutes, she'd be meeting with one of the wealthiest men in the country. George Abendstern, founder and CEO of the multimedia corporation that turned boring weeknight television into high humor. Eager sponsors vied for prime-time slots that demanded tons of cash.

And he wanted to commission a painting! The thought of such a high-profile person asking for her work made her quiver with excitement. The fact that she was desperate for this job only added fuel to her frayed nerves. This could be the big break she'd been waiting for. To have his name on her resume would add the right amount of "gotta have it" pizzazz to her reputation and small, but growing list of clientele.

All week long, she'd been giddy with anticipation. When the call came from his personal assistant, a lady with a quiet,

Southern accent, she could hardly believe her luck. She'd actually thought someone was playing a cruel joke on her at first. She agonized over what to wear and how to do her hair.

Finally she decided that it was the quality of her work that would make or break his decision. He wouldn't care what she looked like in person as long as she appeared professional and her artwork met his expectations. Her classic cream sheath dress would do fine for a meeting with Mr. Abendstern. He didn't need to know she'd bought it seven years ago when she first graduated college and hit the job market.

By the time the elevator reached the sixtieth floor, she was the only remaining passenger. When the doors opened, she stepped out into a small reception area. A young woman with short, impossibly black hair and gothic black lipstick sat behind a granite topped desk. She looked bored and world weary in the way of many young New Yorkers.

Lilly approached her with all the confidence she could muster. "Hi. I'm Lillian Wilcox. I have an appointment with Mr. Abendstern at three."

The young gothic tapped a long fingernail across the keyboard on her desk. "Some ID, please."

Lilly fished out her expired driver's license and showed it to her. The woman waved her past the desk, toward a uniformed, armed guard standing in front of double doors. He opened them for her as she approached, nodding briefly from under the brim of his hat.

She wandered out onto a velvety carpet of deep midnight blue. It completely muffled the sound of her steps. Gleaming,

brushed steel and mahogany furniture graced the room. The entire wall of windows offered a breathtaking view of the brilliant afternoon sun shining on lower Manhattan.

A woman sat behind a desk opposite the windows and glanced up from a large planning book as Lilly approached. She was petite and fine-boned, probably in her late forties although there wasn't a wrinkle to mar her smooth skin. A stylish pale gray suit caressed her thin figure. Short, light blonde hair had been fluffed into precise layers around her head. Her eyes were the same pale gray of her suit and appeared sharp behind small oval-rimmed eyeglasses.

"Miss Wilcox? Nice to meet you. I'm Judy, we talked on the phone."

Her warm accent flowed from her like honey. She stuck out an elegant, pale hand. Lilly shook it lightly. "Yes, nice to meet you, Judy. Please call me Lilly. 'Miss Wilcox' makes me feel like I'm a kindergarten teacher."

"Lilly it is." Judy's smile lit up her face and erased the sharp look in her eyes. "Please come with me. I'm afraid Mr. Abendstern is still busy with his last appointment, but it shouldn't take much longer. TV stars can be so needy. You can put your things on my desk for now. Would you like a cup of coffee, or tea?"

"No thanks. A glass of water would be fine." She followed Judy to a small kitchen area hidden behind the curve of one mahogany paneled wall. If she drank coffee or tea, she feared it would end up spilled or dribbled down the front of her dress—she was that nervous. At least water wouldn't stain.

Judy reached into a small refrigerator and pulled out a cold, dark blue bottle. She popped the top and poured it into a crystal cut glass. "Imported Welsh water, kinda bubbly. Mr. Abendstern loves this stuff. I prefer mint sweet tea, just like home."

Lilly sipped her water and nodded appreciatively. "Don't think I've ever had 'Welsh water', but it's good. Thanks."

"Come on over and sit for a minute. Relax, he's not going to bite you. He's seen your work and the magazine article on you. Nice stuff. Wish I had a house pretty enough for you to paint a picture of too. The brownstone I live in is sheer ugliness."

Judy urged her over to a small, partially hidden seating area. The walls were packed with framed photos of television stars Lilly recognized from all her favorite childhood shows. TV had been a good babysitter for a lonely kid in a dysfunctional home. That, and her jars of paint.

"You have a wonderful job, Judy. It must be fun getting to meet all these famous people."

She wandered over the photos, smiling at each one that brought back special, happier memories. One photo in particular hung away from the others and she immediately recognized the handsome, silver-haired man as Mr. Abendstern. His face appeared in magazines and newspapers every day. She'd armed herself with a bit of research on him and his company for this meeting.

"Oh, yes, it can be fun," Judy answered. "And tedious at the same time. That's a photo of Mr. and Mrs. Abendstern on their last vacation together."

Lilly nodded, studying the photo. "I remember reading an article in the paper about her death. That must have been really hard on him. They have a son and daughter, if I remember correctly, who kept the company running for a while so he could recover."

Judy nodded. "Thank goodness for Gabe and Megan. He was devastated. Loved her to pieces, they all did. It's a very loving family."

Lilly let her artistic mind wander over the subtle smiles and simple touching that had been captured by the photographer's lens. They stood together on a boat, or yacht of some kind, she couldn't tell due to the cropping of the photo. The golden red hue of a setting sun kissed their faces with warmth and their hair was joyfully mussed by the wind. Genuine happiness radiated from the photo.

"It must be tough to have paparazzi in your face when you're trying to grieve the loss of a loved one. I also read in the society column that his daughter got married this summer."

"Yes. Megan was married a few months ago," Judy continued. "She's such a sweet girl, really takes after her mother. Looks like her too. We all just found out Meg's expecting their first child, so Mr. Abendstern is beside himself with being a first-time granddaddy. He's going to spoil that baby rotten."

"How wonderful. It's nice to hear his children are settled and make him a happy grandpa."

"Oh, only Megan," Judy giggled conspiratorially behind her tea. "Gabe, he's the rogue in the family. Hates the big city



and all the pomp and circumstance that's a part of Mr. Abendstern's life. The last time Gabe was here for longer than a day or two was for Meg's wedding. He lives out west, manages the family ranch. Prefers smelly old cattle farming to this." She lifted her arms to indicate the whole building and business included. "But he's not married. Yet."

"Sounds like he's much happier with the freedom of the wide open outdoors," Lilly noted. "Even freedom from the demands of a wife."

"Gabe? I think he'd love to be married. And even though he won't admit it, he adores women. Such a flirt that man is. With impeccable manners too. His mama taught him how to treat a lady good and proper. He's just become engaged to the daughter of Mr. Abendstern's best friend and golfing buddy. Her name's Amanda Pierce. You know, the law firm Pierce, Jenkins and Douglas? Anyway, she's a nice enough girl, gorgeous as a model, but Gabe never seems to smile like he should whenever I see them together. Not sure how they're going to work out a living arrangement after they get married next year, seeing as how she hates cows and country life, and that's what he thrives on—the big outdoors."

Lilly shook her head. The quiet, unfettered living on a farm didn't appeal to everyone. The peaceful serenity of the countryside still called to her. Which was probably why she enjoyed painting landscapes of wide, open spaces.

"Well, I'm sure the two of them will work it out. If they love each other, they can do it."

Judy let out an unladylike snort. The double mahogany door at the end of the large reception area opened and voices

filtered out. They didn't sound too happy. Judy set her iced tea glass in the small sink near the sitting area. Lilly took her cue and did the same.

"Finally." Judy said under her breath. "That Jock Coltrane thinks his show is going to run forever. But he's not funny anymore and I think Mr. Abendstern may have found a way to tell him that 'Spinners' is coming to an end this season. He's probably none too happy. Better you wait here until Mr. 'I'm So Important' leaves."

Lilly nodded and moved behind the wall of the sitting area. *Oh, this was perfect!* Now, the man she was supposed to meet for a commissioned painting would be in a bad mood. Her heart dropped into her stomach. If he turned out to be one of those fickle rich people who changed their minds like the winter winds whipping through the city, she *would* be sick.

She tucked loose strands of hair back into her ponytail and smoothed her dress. Her hands were clammy. She rubbed them together, hoping the friction would warm them up while she stared at the family portrait again. Mr. Abendstern looked so blissful in that photo, with his thick, silver hair lightly tousled over his forehead. He hugged the gorgeous brunette woman in a tight embrace. The look in her eyes said she believed in the love they shared.

What a fantasy, Lilly mused, to be incredibly wealthy *and* in love with your spouse? Such things didn't exist.

"Lilly? Mr. Abendstern is ready for you now."

She grabbed her purse and portfolio and followed Judy into his office. He looked like his photo—larger than life and totally

happy with it. That thick crown of silver hair gleamed from the reflected late summer sun streaming into his office. He was tan, fit, and impeccably dressed in a slate green, summer-weight suit and flowered tie. He stood up when she and Judy came into his office and hurried around his desk to extend a large hand. His eyes sparkled hazel-green, with deep crinkles around them. This man smiled a lot. She didn't miss the fact that he also took a moment to appraise her when she first walked in.

"Miss Wilcox, so glad you came. Please have a seat."

He didn't let go of her hand, his grip firm but gentle, and very warm. He led her over to the large leather chair opposite his wide desk. It pleased her to see he didn't seem to be upset about his last meeting with the aging TV star. He stepped back around his desk and she relaxed a little when he sat down. With a nod from him, Judy closed the door behind her and disappeared.

"Thank you, Mr. Abendstern. I'm still thrilled to have received your call ... well, your assistant's call, on your behalf."

He chuckled. "It's good to know I can still thrill a pretty girl with a simple phone call. Even if it does come from my capable assistant."

She stared at him for one blank moment. His eyes twinkled with obvious teasing and encouraged a shy smile from her lips. But when the teasing glint turned suddenly serious and he said nothing else while he studied her from head to toe, she became uneasy. The silence stretched into

an uncomfortable length. He seemed to be thinking through some serious crisis while he gazed at her.

"Well," she mumbled and smoothed her skirt down her knees again. "Judy told me you saw the article in Architectural Digest? You're interested in having your home's portrait done?"

"Yes, I sure did." He straightened in his chair and pulled the magazine out from a desk drawer, flipping it open to the page with the article that highlighted her in the 'Worth Noting' column. "But before we talk about that, Miss Wilcox, would you mind answering a couple of personal questions?"

"Ah, sure." His directness took her by surprise. "Please, call me Lilly."

"Lilly—pretty name. It suits you. And please call me George. Now, what I want to ask you is this: I don't see a ring on your finger. Are you engaged or dating anyone seriously?"

Her eyes widened and she felt the color drain from her cheeks. This meeting was definitely not going the way she thought it would. He was a widower, after all. He wanted her to call him by his first name after having just met. And he had the power to really screw up her career if she tweaked him the wrong way. Her throat tightened and almost paralyzed her tongue.

She coughed once. "Um, no. Not married and I'm too busy to be dating anyone."

George's eyes crinkled again with a big smile, showing all his teeth like he did in the photo on the wall. "That's fine, Lilly. I need a birthday present for my son. He's been a might

cranky the past couple months, and I thought a painting would cheer him up. A big one. Got a wall in the family room that could easily take a panoramic painting about eight to ten feet long. Can you do something that big?"

*Oh, my God!* "Sure. I'd love to. But, when is his birthday? I need at least four weeks to do something on that scale."

"September twentieth. That's enough time for you?"

"Yes. I think it is." It was a few days shy of a month away. She'd never tackled a painting on that grand scale before but she was determined not to let him see that it made her uneasy. She reached for her new portfolio. "May I show you my samples? Or do you have a particular medium or style in mind? I'll need plenty of photographs and I can take them this weekend to get a jump start on it."

"No need, Lilly." He leaned back in his large leather chair and crossed his legs. "I attended the Tomas Byrne gallery show last Friday night and saw your paintings. You have wonderful style. I'm partial to oil paintings myself. I want you to fly out to Montana."

"Where? To Montana? Well, sure, I guess I can get a flight out and do some photos." Her mind whirled with this strange request. And how would she fund an airline ticket now? Her bank account was running on fumes and her one remaining credit card had reached its limit many months ago.

"Good, good. How soon can you pack your things? Is tomorrow too soon? I'll have my driver pick you up at eight a.m. and take you to the municipal airport. My jet's parked there, and my pilot will fly you to Billings. Marta can pick you

up. She's my housekeeper, keeps Gabe fed. Her husband, Carlo, he's the ranch foreman."

Lilly blinked. "Jet? You mean, a personal jet ... will fly me to Montana?"

"Of course, I don't have the silly thing sitting around collecting dust for nothing." He began writing in a little notebook, his gold pen flashing in the sunlight with his rapid strokes. He didn't bother to look up at her any more. "Do you ride?"

"Ride ... ride what?"

"Horses, Lilly. Have you ever ridden a horse?"

"Not in a long time. We had a horse when I was growing up. But not since then."

"Good. It'll come back to you. You'll need to ride out at the ranch to get the full view and feeling of it all. I want the dimensional feeling and depth to come through from a live painting. Capture the atmosphere, the essence. You can't get that from photographs alone. I'm experienced with art, I know the difference." He reached into his jacket pocket, removed a slim leather wallet and handed her a card without looking up.

"What's this?" she asked, gingerly taking the card from him.

"A credit card, pretty Lilly. I want you to go shopping this afternoon and buy yourself some things for spending a few days around my ranch. Whatever you want, whatever you need."

She took the card and stared at it while he continued scribbling notes. "That pretty dress is nice for city living," he

continued, "but out there you'll need blue jeans and boots and don't forget to buy a hat. Sun's mighty bright this time of year. Buy whatever supplies you need too, for the painting."

Lilly's mouth hung open and she snapped it shut with a loud click of her teeth. "But, Mr. Aben ... George, I can't accept this. Don't you even want to see my samples, before you say yes? This is a highly unusual way to do business, even for an artist."

"Are you arguing with me, young lady? Because unless you don't think you can paint the picture I want, I've already decided I want you to do it."

"Oh." Lilly snapped her mouth shut again. The credit card had no name on it. Just the numbers and bank logo. She'd heard about these special credit cards, with unlimited spending limits that only the very wealthiest people were allowed to have. The potential fairly burned her fingertips off.

"But how can you be so ... so generous with me? We don't know each other. I have to admit I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable about your unusual demands, Mr. Abendstern."

"George." He corrected her and looked up from his note writing. "And I've seen all I need to see, Lilly. Know all about you that I need to know."

She bit her lip before speaking. "You do?"

He looked up with eyebrows raised. "Let me bring you in on a little secret. I had my P.I. run a background check on you. I do that with all my associations—so don't feel that you've been singled out unfairly. In my business I have to be

a quick judge of character, and I have to be absolutely certain about a person."

"My, um, my background?" She swallowed the icy lump of despair that suddenly rose into her throat.

"Yes. Don't worry. I can't have any secrets between us while you're working for me, Lilly. I won't ask you about your past unless I think it's interfering with our working relationship. Is that clear?"

"Ah, yes sir, it is. I appreciate your candor ... I guess."

"I liked what I saw at the gallery last Friday night." His sympathetic smile warmed the icicles that threatened to choke her. "I love your style. Exactly what Gabe needs."

She didn't know whether to object or be flattered beyond belief. "You mean my painting? My painting is exactly what he needs?"

He gave her a quick, measured look. "Exactly. Now, Tomas down at the gallery, he said you took a fifty percent deposit on all new work, right? What's your fee for this painting?"

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. "I'm embarrassed to say this, but you've caught me off guard. Eight to ten feet is larger than any others that I've been commissioned for. I don't want to over quote you either..."

One silver eyebrow arched up when he looked at her. "Is twenty thousand a fair price?"

Her heart skidded to a halt and slammed into her ribs. "Yes, actually, that's a very fair price."

"Good. Here's a check to cover the deposit. I'll pay you the remainder upon delivery." He slapped his notebook closed and flicked his pen onto the desk. "Couple more things, if you



don't mind. I want Gabe to see the painting while you're working on it. I'll call him tonight, set things up so he's knows you're doing a commissioned piece on the ranch—for another magazine expose. But I don't want him to know it's actually a gift for him. And finish it at the ranch. I'll let Marta know you should have the guest rooms in the house to work in until then.”

“Ah, sure,” she nodded obediently. She was barely able to comprehend everything. “I can keep it a secret. And I guess I could stay there for a month to finish the painting on the premises. I'm overwhelmed, of course. Thank you, George.”

He stood up and came over to the chair to take her hand again. To her shock and surprise he kissed her knuckles lightly and then clasped his other hand over it. “Don't thank me, Lilly. You're doing me a huge favor.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

A soft bounce and squeal of tires woke Lilly from her catnap. She squinted sleep-deprived dryness from her eyes and shifted the leather seat from the reclining to sitting position. A row of buildings and various parked aircraft sped past the window, their shapes and colors barely recognizable at this speed. Bright afternoon sun washed across the jet's wing and temporarily blinded her. She closed her eyes again until Captain Gordon's voice chattered from the overhead speaker.

"Welcome to Billings, Miss Wilcox. It'll be a few moments while we taxi over to the hangar. Please stay seated."

This was only her second trip by airplane. Somehow, this experience wouldn't be as soon forgotten as her first. Having the inexplicable luxury of this quiet, twelve seat private jet at her disposal could never compare to the torture of boarding an airplane already packed to the gills with bodies in coach class and a tiny seat that jammed her kneecaps together.

No doubt about it, Mr. Abendstern—George—knew how to live and had the money to do it right. She felt incredibly spoiled that he took a liking to her and offered his private jet.

The aircraft angled toward a cavernous airplane hanger with the words 'Private Charter Craft' painted across the top. A large, dark blue Suburban waited on the edge of the tarmac. Before the pilot could cut the engines a woman jumped out of the driver's side. A thick, black braid of hair swung over her shoulder as she hurried to meet them.

She waved to Lilly in the window seat. This must be Marta, the ranch housekeeper George told her would pick her up. For some reason, Lilly envisioned straitlaced 'Alice' from 'The Brady Bunch'. Except Alice would never wear jeans, cowboy boots and a sleeveless pastel shirt with the same style and elan as this short, plump woman.

Marta surged forward when Lilly stepped down from the jet and engulfed her in a bear hug surprisingly strong for a woman her size.

"Ay-a, it is so good to finally have you here, *Senorita Wilcox*," she sighed.

"Hi. It's nice to meet you, too." Lilly giggled. "I just found out I was coming yesterday."

The other woman's coffee-colored eyes danced with a merriment that would not be easy to extinguish. "Welcome to Montana. I'm Marta Ramirez, housekeeper of the Evening Star. How was your flight out here?"

"Thank you, Marta. And please call me Lilly. The flight was wonderful, of course." She fought an urge to cough as her ribs were squeezed against her lungs. Such demonstrative affection was something she wasn't accustomed to. People didn't hug strangers like that back home in Ohio, or in New York City. But this woman left no doubt about her open and warm personality. She was a hugger.

Marta drove the roomy Suburban with a practiced hand, negotiating the bustling city streets of Billings with the same ease as she now handled the ruts in the dirt road they traveled. They'd been driving for two hours, having left the paved road about half an hour ago. After an initial bit of

chatter, Marta didn't speak much, only smiled like Da Vinci's famous 'Mona Lisa' while she piloted the big truck around potholes and the occasional cow patty.

The scenery was breathtaking and could be summed up in one word: huge. Lilly could visualize a painting in every corner she could see from her window. She'd never known such open skies and a horizon that stretched from one end of the earth to the other. Even her rural central Ohio home didn't have open skies like this. The mountains in the distance had grown larger and more distinct, their craggy peaks starkly outlined against a pale blue canvas.

Fences marked both sides of the dusty road, separating one herd of black cows from another herd of the same black cows. Marta had told her earlier they were Angus cattle, steers to be exact, but that still meant nothing to Lilly at this point. They were all clones of each other. They were black. The little ones were cute. And that was as far as she was willing to go in thinking about them.

They were steak on the hoof. No way was she going to get emotionally attached to a cute, black-as-sin calf bound for the dinner table. Quite possibly her own.

"How much further until we get near the ranch?"

Marta's smile spread across her plump cheeks, creating a contrast for white teeth against her bronzed skin.

"We've been driving on our land for thirty minutes," she said proudly. "You see that hill up ahead, with the house on it? That's the main house. The ranch hands live in the bunkhouse near the barn, or they drive up from Granite Springs. Behind the house is the lake. It's quiet there. Nice

fishing in the lake too. My husband, Carlo, he stocks it each year with trout. Do you fish, Senorita?"

"No, not since I left home. We had mostly carp in our local ponds. They don't taste that good. So, how many acres is the ranch? It looks ... big."

"Fifty two thousand five hundred thirty acres, to be exact."

Lilly's mouth dropped. "I have no concept of that at all. What, the ranch is the size of Rhode Island? Wow."

Marta laughed. "It's considered average for a Montana ranch. There's still a lot of land out here. And ninety five percent of this is pasture for the Angus. Gabe keeps a few hundred acres for his Appaloosas. That man breeds some fine champion horses, too. He's got a way with animals."

"I love horses. My dad kept an old Morgan horse. I used to ride him bareback through our orchards in the summer. Dad sold him when I was thirteen."

Marta's quick glance held compassion. "Well, you'll have plenty of chances out here. I'm sure Gabe will be glad to teach you how to ride again."

Marta slowed the Suburban onto a winding gravel road that angled up the hill. Thick copses of aspen trees, with their ghostly pale trunks and limbs, lined the long driveway leading up to the main house. A spacious, sloping pasture on one side of the road contained at least a dozen horses; most were black with white spotted butts. Two of them were pearly white with black spots all over their bodies, like a snow leopard's fur. These beautiful creatures looked nothing like her family's old, dependable, bay gelding.

The main house was a truly impressive structure. It captured Lilly's breath and she nearly turned blue from her first sight of it as they drove closer. Immediately her artistic mind assessed the deep, cinnamon color of the logs, the angles of the heavy wood beams that anchored the roof's steep pitch, the sweeping gables and the natural slate shingles covering the roof with muted colors of gray, blue and brown. A bold stone chimney dominated the center of one side, and two more echoed the larger one across the roof line. She measured the symmetry and spacing between the many windows with her eyes. Flower boxes hung from nearly every window, spilling forth a riot of color and pinpoints of light against the heavy logs.

Lilly remembered to breathe and air whooshed out of her lungs. "What an amazing house. How many square feet is it?"

Marta laughed, a throaty sound that drowned out the growl of the Suburban's powerful engine as it climbed up the driveway. "Oh, around six thousand, give or take a few I guess. Let's unload your things first and I'll give you a quick tour so you won't get lost. Carlo is going to prepare dinner tonight, his famous tequila-lime steaks. It's the one thing he does better than I do—barbecuing. As long as he stays out of my kitchen, I let him do the B-B-Q."

"Sounds wonderful, Marta. I can't wait to meet your husband. My mom always said a man who can cook anything edible is worth his weight in gold."

Marta drove down a small, two-track path lined with more boulders and wildflowers. The large lake behind the house came into view first. Sunlight shimmered off the surface and

beckoned Lilly with the promise of soothing coolness. Thick pine and aspen shrouded the far side of the lake in shade and enveloped it like a well-guarded secret. A wooden pier jutted out into the water, with a small canoe anchored to one side. Adirondack style chairs waited for someone to sit in them and rest.

"Now that's a lake." Lilly felt her eyes widen with awe.

Marta parked between two identical, dark blue pick-up trucks. "Gabe likes to swim in the lake first thing in the mornings, when the fog rolls across the surface. It's his wake-up fix. Then he comes inside, smelling like a trout and gobbles down his breakfast."

Lilly caught the teasing wiggle of Marta's eyebrows and giggled in return. She stepped out of the Suburban and reached for her things in the back. Marta grabbed one of her bags and headed up the long curve of stone steps.

They entered through the back of the house between the family room and a game room set up with a heavy wooden pool table. The interior was spacious and bright with natural daylight spilling in from the many windows and soaring, high ceilings. Leather furniture gave the family room a cozy feel, as did an abundance of plaid pillows and throw blankets. Beneath her feet, a wide-plank knotty pine floor criss-crossed the expanse from one end of the house to the next. Bronze sculptures of wildlife, Indians wearing detailed native garb and cowboys on horseback graced the many tables set up between the furniture. And on the walls, Lilly recognized the classic black and white photography of Andrew Wyeth, ballet and dance hall paintings by Degas, Spanish contemporaries

by Emelio Garza, and garden paintings by Monet. She stared at them, unable to move or speak. These were artists she'd only seen in textbooks or museums. She was determined to come back later and study them up close. To think that her work would be hugging the walls of this gorgeous home alongside these famous artists gave her chills. She followed Marta through the house, silently admiring the many brilliantly colored Native American wool rugs that were strategically placed along the path.

Once upstairs, Lilly learned that all six bedrooms were suites, each with their own private bath, a sitting room and the bedroom. She had the spacious adjoining guest rooms at the end of the hall, with a fortunate southern exposure and perfect view of the lake. One of the rooms had been emptied of furniture so that she could set up her easel and paints.

Marta dropped Lilly's bag near the bed. "Okay, I leave you now to settle in. We have dinner at six-thirty tonight on the back patio. Gabe should be back from running a herd of yearling steers out to a new pasture by then, maybe sooner."

Lilly nodded. "Thank you, Marta. You've made me feel very welcome here."

"No thanks are needed, Senorita. We are always happy to have guests at the ranch. You will fit in right away. Just remember, this is a working ranch and we don't play dress-up for dinner. Okay?"

"Not a problem for me, Marta. All I brought were jeans and sweaters."

\* \* \* \*



An hour later, after an energizing nap and a hot shower, Lilly couldn't contain her excitement any longer. She had to go outside and explore this beautiful ranch and the surrounding landscape. Dressed in her favorite Levi's, canvas sneakers and a white, sleeveless cotton sweater, she jammed a rolled-brim straw hat onto her head and tucked her still-wet hair under it. On the way out the door, she grabbed a sketchpad and some charcoal pencils for some quick studies. If she was going to complete this painting on time, she'd better start now.

After waving to Marta in the laundry room, Lilly headed out to the lake first. The rubber soles of her sneakers made soft squeaky noises on the wooden planks. She peered over the edge of the last board. The water was surprisingly clear. Dark green fronds of waterweeds swayed on the sandy bottom. Schools of small fish darted in and out of the protective shadows of those fronds. On a whim, she kicked off her sneakers, sat down on the pier and rolled her jeans up to her knees. Then she dipped her toes into the lake with an appreciative sigh.

With her feet dangling in the cool water, the sun warming her shoulders and exposed neck, Lilly set about sketching the lake and the mountain peaks behind it that reflected into the water's shimmering surface. She did several versions, finishing four pages of test sketches that she liked well enough to work into a painting.

Satisfied that she had a decent start, and a good feeling about the job at hand, she set her sketchpad aside. She closed her eyes and enjoyed this moment, feeling comfortable

and relaxed for the first time in many months. The quiet lake, the clear blue sky and the immense satisfaction that she had a job right now all combined to make her inordinately happy. The stress of her day-to-day life in New York melted away.

A gentle breeze stirred the water and carried an intriguing aroma with it. She took an appreciative, deep sniff of leather, musk and spices. When a shadow moved across her shoulders, she suddenly realized a man stood directly behind her. She startled and twisted around.

"Easy there, Miss. Didn't mean to scare you."

That voice ... deep, sexy, it echoed through her mind and touched nerves she thought she'd buried. All she could see was the outline of his cowboy hat against the bright sun, his face dark and inscrutable beneath the hat's wide brim. How on Earth could a man this big not make a sound to warn of his approach? He tucked his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans and leaned over her shoulder to admire the drawing on her sketchpad.

She got a good look at his face then, and the tickling memory of recognition ... somewhere, she'd met him before. Good God, he was devilishly handsome! She wouldn't forget that face. She wouldn't forget that strong, angular jaw dusted with golden-brown stubble. Thick, dark hair brushed across his nape under the sexy angle of his hat. And those eyes, hazel with sparks of green and gold in them ... exactly like his dad's.

*Oh. My. God.* It was him! *He* was Gabe Abendstern. This was the same man whose fingers found their way inside her body and brought her to orgasm on the terrace. The man

she'd locked out while she ran away. Her heart thrummed an erratic beat inside her chest. She pulled her feet out of the water and shook them off. When she reached for her sketchpad, he closed his hand over hers.

"May I?"

Lilly froze. "What?"

"Your sketches, mind if I take a look?"

"Ah, sure. It is your lake, after all." She slid her hand out from under his, utterly aware of the warmth of his skin and the rough calluses that brushed across her fingers.

He took the sketchpad from her, a slow smile playing on his lips. "Yeah. Marta told me you were out here, and that I should introduce myself. Welcome to the Evening Star."

Quickly she averted her eyes. "Thanks."

Warmth rushed to settle between her legs. She squeezed her knees and thighs together, concentrating on the lake, trying to quell the memory of his gentle, firm fingers on her clit and how he'd slowly pushed them inside her vagina. A tremor of ecstasy whispered through her mind and throbbed urgently inside the needy cleft of her pussy.

## CHAPTER SIX

*What the fuck...?*

Was his mind playing cruel tricks on him? Gabe tried not to stare at her. The way her posture suddenly stiffened and how quickly she looked away—she was uncomfortable with him.

She sure looked like the little hooker he'd *almost* had his way with at Dad's party a few months back. Same pretty eyes and mouth, smooth silky skin, and those long legs ... even sitting down with her jeans rolled up and slender feet dangling in the water, it could be her. Her hair might even be chestnut-red under that hat.

He cursed himself for getting drunk that night, his memory was a bit off kilter because of it. This was 'Miss Lilliana Wilcox'—some brilliant new artist from New York that his dad had decided to take pity on and sponsor. This was not supposed to be the 'Lisa' he'd been having wet dreams about every night.

Her smell and taste, the feel of her sweet little ass bouncing on his cock, all of it had been seared into his brain, torturing him day and night. What was he supposed to do now? Strip off her jeans, spread her thighs and plunge his tongue deep into her tight little hole? One taste of her slick cunt and he'd know for certain if this was 'Lisa' or not. Then he'd take what she owed him: a good, long, hard fuck that lasted until Tuesday. Oh yeah, it's what he'd dreamed about doing for months!

But not now.

Anger slammed into his gut with more force than if he'd been punched by Mike Tyson. The little bitch was fucking his dad, he was sure of it. *Damn!* That's how Dad knew her, from one of those parties at his club. How long had this been going on? How deep had this little whore gotten her claws into him? Dad was vulnerable to pretty women. He was especially soft on those who appeared to be sweet and innocent and helpless. Like this one. Those big, dark blue eyes had a shyness in them that almost—*almost*—made him feel kind and gentle toward her.

Whatever game she was playing, he'd play along. For now. Tonight, he'd call his dad and have a long chat with him about the wily little bitch. Depending on what his dad said, he'd either ignore her completely while she finished her 'job' here or he'd have some fun of his own. And right now, as hard as he felt himself getting, he didn't care if Amanda ever found out.

*Damn!* What was wrong with him? He was engaged to Amanda now and that meant he should be faithful to her no matter how strong his attraction was to this woman.

He picked up her sketchpad and studied it with a practiced eye. Both his parents had taught him to appreciate and enjoy fine art. The sketches he saw now were good, very good. If they'd been terrible or even average, he would have known she was a fake. But she had a gift—more than one from his standpoint. Her attention to detail, depth perception and shading had captured the lake and mountain in very few strokes. He could understand how easily she'd slipped her hooks into his dad.

"Nice work," he commented dryly, still smarting from her inability or refusal to recognize him.

"Thanks. I'm Lilly, by the way. You must be Gabe, right?"

She hiked up both feet and slipped her shoes back on. In doing so, her jeans gaped open behind her ass and gave him a clear view of her soft pale skin and a hint of pink panties. His mouth watered.

*Steady, boy. You need to get control of your cock.*

"That's right." He tucked her sketchpad under his arm and without thinking about it, lowered his hand to help her stand up.

She actually flinched when his hand appeared in front of her eyes, briefly, but enough for him to see it. Was she afraid of him? She should be. The things he wanted to do to her right now ought to send her screaming back to the city. After a heartbeat, a trembling smile returned to her pretty mouth and she slid her fingers into his. Her palms were cool and twitched with nerves. He tightened his grip and gave a little tug. She jumped up, standing way too close. Her hat tipped off and sent a cascade of damp, glossy auburn hair tumbling over her shoulders.

Oh yeah, definitely *her*. She was tall, like he remembered, her body fitting into his in all the right places. He held onto her hand even though she pulled back, trying to break free. Her scent whispered into his mind like fresh, dew-kissed wildflowers stretching up to meet the morning sun.

"Have we met before?" Perhaps he could jostle her memory.

She blanched, all of the color in her cheeks disappearing like watercolor. "N-no. I would remember if we did."

"Like hell." He couldn't help it. He wrapped his other arm around her waist, drew her tight against his body and kissed her. Hard. Wanting to punish her for all the torture she'd put him through. He slashed his mouth across hers and forced her head back. Her lips firmed into a line beneath his, then softened and parted as he swept his tongue across them, unexpectedly giving him access to her sweet, soft mouth. Once she opened for him he plunged inside with reckless abandon, savoring her taste, her silky texture and the mating dance with her tongue.

Gabe was lost inside the slow burn, until she began to squirm and mew in protest like a lost kitten. He broke off the kiss, breathing hard, and looked into her eyes. She blinked; her pupils were so wide they made her eyes look black with a thin blue outline. She quivered in his arms, her hands clenched at his chest.

Was it from fear? Or desire?

Suddenly he remembered seeing this look on her face before, on the terrace. Something had frightened the shit out of her then, too.

"Let me go, please. Please!" Even her voice shook.

"Shit," he swore softly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

She spun away, the back of one hand pressed against her mouth. She looked terrorized, pale and shaky. She started to walk down the pier; her steps slow at first, then faster until she was actually sprinting away from him.

Gabe watched her run up the hill and disappear inside the back door. What was going on with her? One minute she was hot in his hands, the next fighting to escape.

"That was smooth, Gabe, real smooth. Damn, damn, damn!" He picked up her hat, sketchpad and pencils and followed her back up to the house.

\* \* \* \*

Of all the rotten luck, it would have to be *him*! Why, God, why?

Lilly paced across the floor of her bedroom. Her sneakers made soft squeaks with every turn and step. Little by little, her hands stopped trembling and her heart eased its erratic beat. She needed to repeat to herself that Craig would not be able to torture her any longer. Craig was not here. And if she got pleasure from a handsome man's kiss, it wasn't a bad thing.

*"You have a right to experience sexual gratification as a human being, Lilly."*

Her psychiatrist's gentle voice echoed in her memory. How long would it take for the pain to go away? When would she ever be able to trust another man, let him touch her intimately—and not freak out?

Gabe's sexy voice had been the final clue that told her where she'd met him before. Of course, he'd been drunk then. Did he remember everything as clearly as she did? Her father couldn't remember half the things he said or did after drinking. Besides, she'd never thought of herself as particularly memorable.



For a moment, he'd actually acted nice while standing on the pier chatting with her. He'd been what her mother would call a gentleman. But the second she put her hand in his and stood up she felt the sudden change, the hardening of his grip around her hand, the way his hazel eyes darkened with lust. Her lips still burned from that kiss. She touched a finger to her swollen mouth, marveling at the ferocity and pure sexual energy he'd conveyed with just one kiss.

She'd *never* been kissed that thoroughly before! Her brain had quit thinking for one blissful moment and she allowed herself to *feel* him. Feel the power and barely restrained need flowing through his body into hers. He acted like a man starving for her kiss, craving the closeness of her body pressed so neatly into his. His hands held her possessively, firmly, and yet with incredible gentleness.

She examined her wrist, expecting it to be bruised. Nothing marked her skin, not even redness from his vise-like grip. Gabe knew his way around a woman's body and knew exactly how much pressure to put on her skin to keep her where he wanted her. He also knew how quickly she responded to his touch. And he expected it.

*No doubt about it, he thinks I really am that hooker from the party.*

The explosion of incredible pleasure during that one stolen moment with him had kept her awake for many nights, yearning and wondering. Simply pleasuring herself with her own fingers didn't give her the same intensity. And she absolutely refused to buy a dildo! That was entirely too embarrassing.

She could not let him touch her again. Just looking at him made her tingle with anticipation from head to toe. That handsome bastard had no right to be kissing, or touching, or trying to seduce her. He was the son of her employer. Even worse, he was engaged. He had a fiancée! In a month, she'd leave this house and never see him again.

The clock on the night stand showed six-twenty. Marta and Carlo were expecting her downstairs for dinner in ten minutes and she couldn't be rude and keep them waiting. Gabe would, of course, be there too. *Well, fine.* She would pretend nothing happened between them. Of course he didn't want anyone else to know he had a rendezvous with a hooker while he was engaged to some fancy lawyer's daughter. He wouldn't dare besmirch his good family name with that kind of mess, would he? If his fiancée found out, she'd dump him faster than a load of garbage. No way in hell was Lilly going to accept the title of 'the evil other woman'.

No. She'd keep this a secret. That bridge had been both crossed and burned, so might as well move on and never look back.

She ducked into the bathroom, splashed her face with cold water, then twisted her hair up and secured the heavy mass with a pearl barrette. The mirror showed how flushed her cheeks were, as if she had a sunburn. She bit her lips. They were still red and swollen, still tingled, still tasted like him. She scrubbed a towel across her mouth and left the room.

Downstairs, she followed the sound of Marta's high-pitched scolding in Spanish mixed with intermittent giggles. A man's deep baritone answered her. Lilly poked her head around the

corner. Marta and this man were wrestling for control of a large pot. Marta swatted the man's hands, he danced back, holding the pot out of her reach, then leaned down to plant a kiss on her round cheek. He wasn't tall, but he was built like a bull with a barrel chest, thick arms and dark, wavy hair threaded liberally with silver at his temples. Mischief and good humor sparkled from black, thickly lashed eyes. A denim shirt was rolled up to his elbows and his jeans were faded, topped by a large silver belt buckle. He spied Lilly first and his tanned face broke into a wide grin.

"Senorita!" He gave Marta her pot. "There you are. Come in, come in. I'm Carlo, Marta's slave and ever-loving husband. It's so good to meet you."

"Hello," Lilly smiled. She extended her hand and was immediately swept into a tight, dancing embrace.

He grinned at her wolfishly. "Such a pretty lady, I must dance with you. Come out to the patio. I have musica on the stereo."

"Carlo!" Marta slapped him with her kitchen towel. "Be careful with her, she doesn't know your Mexican two-step. Stop drinking the tequila and watch your steaks, I don't want them burned!"

"Yes, my darling," he answered with a singsong voice and a wink at Lilly. "Come with Carlo, Senorita. I will make you a drink while we dance to Los Muchachos."

Humming to the music, Carlo waltzed her out from the kitchen onto the patio. Lilly had no choice but follow his lead. Large rectangles of slate formed the floor of the patio and a wide trellis covered half of it. Climbing roses twined into the

trellis and created a cool summer haven for guests to enjoy the outdoors. The sweet fragrance of roses scented the air around them. Colorful paper lanterns hung overhead and were strung along the edge of the patio. The lanterns, combined with the piped in sultry beat of Latin music gave it a festive air. Carlo danced her over to a long wooden table covered with a bright yellow cloth, fat candles in various colors and a place setting for four. He bowed and indicated she should take one of the cushioned chairs.

"Have a seat, por favor. What kind of drink would you like? I have tequila, beer, tequila, and beer. Or I can get you some wine from the cellar."

She was feeling lightheaded already from his dancing. "Actually, a beer sounds wonderful. Can I help you with anything?"

"No, no. You sit, I serve. I'll be right back. You enjoy Los Muchachos while I turn some steaks. Mi Amor will be very upset if I burn her steak."

He returned with a cold, long-necked bottle of Corona, a lime wedge stuck into the hole. "Would you like a glass? And how do you like your steak?"

She took the beer from him. "No glass, thanks. And I prefer medium, if that's okay?"

"No problemo. I fix it how you like it. I'm glad you aren't a vegetable eater like Amanda. That poor girl has no idea what a real meal is. She's so worried about every pinch of fat in her diet. It's not natural for a woman to be skin and bones."

"Oh, you mean she's vegetarian?" Lilly took a sip of beer. She watched with wide eyes as Carlo downed a small shot

glass full of tequila. "A lot of people are," she continued. "I grew up on a small farm, and Mom used to make pot roast every other night. I guess I don't like to think about it, but I do eat meat."

Carlo raised his empty glass to her. "It's a way of life at the Evening Star."

A faster tune picked up the pace of the music. He set his tequila glass down on the table and wiggled his fingers at her. "Oh, I like this song. Please, dance with me? You have a natural rhythm and I like a good dance partner."

She did enjoy dancing. And this was fun music. "Okay, lead on."

He swept her out of her chair and twirled her around the patio. She giggled, trying to keep up with his moves and out from under his cowboy boots. Carlo moved with surprising agility for a man of his size. Within a few minutes she understood the pattern he led her into and began to improvise with twists and twirls of her own. She was breathless and invigorated by the time the song ended.

"Carlo, I hope my steak isn't burned to a crisp." Marta carried a large tray to the table, loaded down with salads, baked potatoes and biscuits. A wide smile belied her stern words.

"Of course not, my darling." He gave Lilly one last twirl and grabbed his wife's arm.

Marta squealed with delight and danced with him while Lilly stood on the side and clapped her hands in tune. She hadn't had this much spontaneous fun in a long time. It felt

good to let go, relax, and simply enjoy the company of others.

Until the hair on the back of her neck prickled. She turned around, her clap frozen in mid-air. Gabe stood behind her, leaning his hip against the patio door. Strong arms crossed over his broad chest. He'd changed clothes. Dressed in black from head to toe in snug jeans that hugged his thighs and a black t-shirt that should have been outlawed in every state. It stretched across his chiseled upper body to perfection. No hat this time. Damp hair tousled over his forehead and his jaw was clean-shaven.

My, oh my! Did the man have any idea what he did to a woman's lust quotient? Judging by the slow, sexy smile that curved his lips, he knew exactly how attractive he was to the opposite sex. And, oh so dangerous.

*Stay away from him. Run, hide. Don't touch!*

He pushed away from the door and walked toward her, not permitting her eyes to slip from his captivity. The smoldering gaze trapped Lilly; she could not look away. Without asking, he took her hand and gently tugged her out onto the patio for the next dance. She barely noticed the slow song and how Marta and Carlo danced close, her plump cheek resting on her husband's chest with her eyes closed.

Gabe drew her into his embrace, one hand holding hers up, the other splayed across the curve of her lower spine. When she automatically placed her free hand on his wide shoulder, he grinned like a satisfied lion that had caught his prey.

"Don't worry, sugar. You're safe from me out here with them."

"Them?" she blinked. *God, he smelled so good!* "Oh, you mean Marta and Carlo. Yeah, well, you have a lot of nerve—dancing with me now."

"Why? Because I kissed you?"

Heat rushed to her cheeks and flooded the folds of her pussy with moisture. "Yes. If I'm not mistaken, you're engaged. That's not appropriate behavior, now is it?"

"Course not, sugar. I do apologize for taking advantage of you. Not having my beautiful fiancée here on a regular basis is getting harder and harder to tolerate. And you are a tempting little piece of ass, even if you are fuckin' my daddy."

"What?" She jerked in his arms and he tightened them so she could barely breathe. He pressed her hips into his and there was no mistaking the long, thick cock that throbbed against her belly.

He leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "Don't play stupid with me, *Miss Wilcox*. Or should I call you Lisa? That is your call name, right? I'm not above having fun with a willing whore. But since you're my daddy's whore, well that changes things a bit."

"What! I'm not..." she lowered her voice after a quick glance at Marta and Carlo. They still danced slow and sweet together, oblivious to her torment. "I'm not a whore, Gabe. Now let go of me. I've had enough of your macho male attitude."

She tried again to twist away from him, but he hugged her tighter. He forced his knee between her legs while he danced

her further from Marta and Carlo. The firm line of his erection rubbed against her mound. Certainly he could feel the moisture from her pussy seeping through the crotch of her jeans?

"I ought to kick you in the shins," she ground out between clenched teeth. He grinned back at her, those two dimples mocking her.

"I'm not done with you yet, sugar, so stop trying to run away. Now listen up. I wasn't engaged to Amanda when I met you that night. And I meant what I said then ... I really did enjoy pleasuring you. I've dreamt about having a whole lot more than my fingers buried deep inside you. But like Cinderella, you disappeared at the stroke of midnight. You owed me one. Hell, you still do. But now..."

"And now," she interrupted, "now you're engaged to be married. Right? Isn't that what you were going to say? So get over it. Let me go and leave me alone so I can do my job here."

The song ended. He released her so suddenly she thought she'd drop to the ground. He walked over to the bar and helped himself to a cold beer; his smile was as charming as ever and he was apparently unaffected by their dance together.

"Steaks are done," Carlo announced proudly.

"Not a moment too soon," Lilly whispered to herself. She wanted to flee the patio. All her instincts screamed at her to run away, put as much distance between Gabe and herself as she could.



And that's exactly what Dr. Morrison told her she couldn't continue doing. She had to face up to her fears now. No man had the right to abuse her the way Craig had done. She was no longer a victim and she could fight back. Most importantly of all, it was perfectly normal and healthy to be angry about it.

Yes, anger was strong medicine. Gabe was pushing her into a corner, testing her boundaries. She needed to turn the tables on him and fight back. Fight dirty if she had to. If he wouldn't leave her alone, she had no other option but to quit this job and explain to his father why.

She sat down at the table and finished her beer, grateful for the cold, mellow malt flavor sliding down her dry throat. She rarely drank at all, but right now, a beer buzz was more than welcome.

Marta set out the salad bowls, landed a huge baked potato on her plate and offered her buttery biscuits. Gabe sat directly across the table from her, the long necks of two more Corona's in hand. He set one in front of her empty bottle.

"Thanks." She stretched her lips into a parody of a smile. He took another long drink of beer and she couldn't help but notice the way his throat moved as he swallowed. What would it feel like, taste like, to run her tongue up along the side of his neck? When he set the beer down, the lust-filled look he gave her said he was thinking something similar. She licked her lips and actually saw a flare of awareness darken his eyes.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Would it be that easy to turn the tables on Gabe? Could she gain control by offering herself to him? He already thought she was a hooker, so he'd expect that kind of behavior from her. What would happen if he didn't resist, or simply didn't care about his commitment to his fiancée?

That old demon, self doubt, reared its ugly head into Lilly's conscience. She'd better think this untested strategy through before doing anything rash and regrettable. He was the son of her employer, after all. No need to start a fire when the kitchen was already too hot.

Thankfully the sizzling t-bone placed on her plate by chef Carlo captured her attention. The aroma was the answer to pure soul food. She waited for him to serve Marta, Gabe and himself. Once Carlo seated himself next to Marta, he raised his tequila glass to the center of the table.

"To the beautiful Senorita Lilly, welcome to our home, the Evening Star."

Marta and Gabe followed his lead and lifted their beers, so she picked hers up and leaned over the table to click against theirs.

"Thank you very much." She took a sip. "I can't say I've ever had a welcome party. This is very nice."

Gabe's hazel eyes sparkled dangerously against the setting sun and flickering candlelight. "Pleasure, I'm sure. Hope you enjoy your stay."

"Si, welcome," cheered Marta while she passed the salad dressing to Lilly. "For me, it's nice to have another woman around the house for a while, to help me put up with all these bad men."

"Ha!" chuckled Carlo. "She loves us bad men. You, my darling, wouldn't know what to do without us around the house."

"Oh, I would know exactly what to do. I'd have a lot of time to lay around instead of picking up after you. This man," Marta pointed her fork at Carlo. "He leaves his dirty, smelly socks all over the house. So if you see one, tell me so I can scold him."

Lilly used her napkin to hide the giggles with her mouth full of juicy steak. She nodded to Marta, feeling strangely like a member of this family after only a few hours already. More so than she had ever felt with her own family. Well, except for the brooding, thoughtful looks Gabe didn't bother to hide from her or anyone else. Did the housekeeper and foreman notice anything overtly sexual from him toward her at all? Was it her overactive imagination?

"Miss Wilcox," Gabe said between mouthfuls. "Why don't you tell us a little about yourself? I didn't get a resume from my dad before you came. I like to know who's working on the ranch property."

If there ever was a hidden message in a man's words, this was it. If he wanted it, she'd give him the whole boring scoop at once, leaving out the gory details.

"You can call me Lilly, Gabe." She smiled sweetly at him, and then lay down her knife and fork to pour Italian dressing

over her salad. "I grew up in Marion, Ohio. That's a small town north of Columbus. I'm an only child. My mom and dad owned a thirty-acre apple and pear orchard. We also had seasonal berries and pumpkins in the fall."

"It sounds very nice." Marta's smile was genuine.

Lilly waved her fork in a circle. "Definitely nothing on the scale of this beautiful ranch. Mom stayed home with me until I got into high school and then she worked as a secretary for a small real estate company in town. Dad worked the farm. He went bankrupt when I was a senior in high school and my parents ended up divorcing. I earned a partial scholarship to Ohio State and graduated with my bachelor's in Fine Art from there. At that point I decided I wanted more excitement in my life and headed for New York. That was a huge culture shock for a small town girl."

"Oh, pobrecita!" Marta looked quite sad for her. "But you like the big city, yes?"

"At first, yes. It was exciting, so many things to see and do. I had a job as an illustrator with a book publisher. Then I moved to the Times and did some art for them. But it wasn't what I really wanted to do. And the pay was really rotten. So, I decided to start out on my own four months ago. After the magazine did an article on me, thanks to a friend I have who works at Architectural Digest, I started getting calls for work. And that's how I met Mr. Abendstern and why I'm here."

She ended with a shrug of her shoulders and a lopsided grin, carefully avoiding Gabe's intense scrutiny.

Marta's eyes were still mesmerized by her brief biography. "You don't like the big city anymore? It seems so wonderful. I think it would be so much fun to live and work there."

"Ah, no," Lilly answered definitively. "It's too expensive, too crowded, and the landscapes are non-existent unless you drive out of the city. I had to sell my car to pay rent and taking taxi's or the subway everywhere is a hassle. As soon as I have enough money saved up, I'm moving out to Santa Fe. The scenery is supposed to be spectacular, and they have a thriving artists' community. The pace is slower too. I really enjoy being outdoors, or so I've discovered since living in New York. Which is not something I would have wished for when I was a kid."

Gabe polished off a biscuit slathered with butter and melting honey. "Like they say, be careful what you wish for, 'cuz it'll come around and bite you in the ass."

"Gabriel!" Marta admonished him. "Mind your manners, young man. You're not too big for me to put you over my knee."

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned obediently and reached for another biscuit.

"You're one to talk, Gabe," Carlo agreed with his wife. "You hate New York more than the Senorita does. Me? I'm happy right where I am. My horse, my steers, and my beautiful wife, I am a happy man."

Marta slapped her hand against his belly. "Not in that order, of course."

"Of course not, my darling." Carlo winked at Lilly over Marta's head before he kissed his wife.

Lilly could not understand why she blushed at that small show of true affection between them. Her parents never kissed each other or even held hands in public. She'd known from the time she was eight or nine years old, that they really didn't like each other at all. By the time she started high school, they'd slept in separate rooms. Their divorce had been an anti-climactic event, a blessing in disguise. She bit her lip and settled back in her chair with another forced smile. These two loved each other.

"So, a pretty girl like you must have lots of boyfriends, yes?" Marta still beamed from her husband's affections.

Lilly paled. She actually felt the blood leave her face and pool with thick dread in her stomach. "Not right now."

"Why not right now?" Gabe prodded, his gaze pinned on her.

"I'm too busy for dating. Some days I work 'round the clock and barely have time to fix myself something to eat, or I get so involved in my work I totally forget about food. My life just isn't conducive to dating. That's why."

Marta's eyes went wide. "Oh no, you can't do that to yourself!"

Lilly shrugged again and lifted her beer for a long draft, finishing it. "That's the way of life for an artist. They don't call us 'starving' for no good reason."

Marta slapped down her napkin and turned to her husband. "Carlo, she needs a man. She needs a boyfriend. How about that young man you hired on, what's his name?"

Carlo nodded enthusiastically. "Robbie. Yes, he's a nice young man. He's..."

"Robbie's busy," Gabe cut in. He picked up his empty bottle, grabbed Lilly's and headed over to the bar for two fresh ones.

Marta ignored Gabe. "Robbie's a nice young man. Muy guapo—very cute, Senorita. Would you like to meet him?"

"Ah, I, ah, well..."

"I said, Robbie's busy. I've got him riding fences in the North pastures. He won't be back for a week." Gabe set a fresh beer on the table in front of Lilly with a firm snap.

The shrill sound of the telephone on the bar saved her from having to answer any more questions about her non-existent love life. Gabe stalked back over and snatched the phone from its cradle with a jerk.

Was it her imagination, or did he sound strangely jealous of the idea that she would date a man while she was here? She considered pursuing the idea. No doubt he'd give her either the cold shoulder, or, he'd explode with male possessiveness.

\* \* \* \*

As much as he loved Marta and Carlo, Gabe wanted to clobber them. He knew Marta couldn't resist her match-makin' mama tendencies, but he also knew for certain that young Robbie would piss his pants trying to handle a hot, scheming woman like Lilly Wilcox. There was no way was he going to allow his new ranch hand to get involved with her.

He picked up the phone, not bothering to hide his growl. "This is Gabe."

"Someday, buddy boy, you're gonna wish you weren't such a suspicious ass. Her record's clean."

Gabe recognized his friend Steve Meredith's voice immediately. He glanced over at the dinner table where Marta and Carlo continued to entertain Lilly. He'd asked Steve to investigate her four months ago and for the first time in his impressive P.I. career, Steve could not come up with a damned thing. Of course, he only had a first name to go on then, and a wrong one at that. As soon as he found out who Lilly was, he'd called Steve back with the right information.

"What'd you find?" He kept his voice low and a careful eye on the table.

"Not a single crumb of evidence. She's got no ties to your old man. Not a single one except for having met with him for the first time yesterday. And she hasn't used that credit card he gave her either."

Gabe chuckled. "She's only had it a day. Give her time."

"You know your women better than I, but I doubt this one will. She's twenty-eight years old. Rents a flat in Soho right in artist central. No roommate, no pets. Smarter than you too, she graduated Magna Cum Laude from Ohio State University. Parents divorced, no siblings. Pays her bills on time, owns no property. Her bank account is pitiful. Only about forty clams to her name until she cashed the check your dad wrote her, probably her commission deposit."

Gabe sipped his beer while he listened, enjoying the way Lilly's breasts bounced inside that pretty white sweater she wore when she laughed at one of Carlo's jokes. "Work history?"



"This is where you have me stumped, because the escort service would have tax records on her. She never earned a penny from Easy Knights. Which means, she never worked for them. Unless, she was a fill-in and got paid under the table. That happens when one of the ladies is sick, someone not really employed by the service is asked to cover for them and takes that pay hush-hush. But she could be telling you the truth on that one. I'm not sure how or why she was involved in that four months ago. There's no record of it."

"I'm still not convinced," Gabe said. "You sure they file tax records on their employees?"

"Hell yeah," Steve confirmed. "They're registered as a business entity. They have to file. But there is one little bit of info you might find even more interesting than that."

Lilly chanced a look over at him then. It was a fleeting glance, but he caught the appreciative flicker in her eyes when she looked down his body. It was enough to make his dick twitch and throb inside his jeans. What kind of game was she playing now? All during dinner she switched from frightened and fragile, to hot and wanton. She was a mysterious little package, and he was dying to unwrap her—real slow.

"What? A boyfriend? Husband? Ex? What?"

Steve's cough into the phone indicated he felt uncomfortable relaying this next piece of information. "She, ah, spent some time in a hospital last year. A psychiatric recovery program for survivors of rape and sexual abuse. State funded place in upstate New York. Records for that are locked up tight. All I could dig up is that she was there for

two months, and then she had six months of counseling with a Dr. Anna Morrison."

Gabe's gut clenched so tight he thought his dinner and beer had turned to molten lead. He set his bottle of Corona down, his enjoyment of it completely gone.

"Damn," he swore softly into the phone. "What happened? Got a name on the perp'?"

"Yeah, dead guy name of Craig Halloran. Self-defense. She shot him with his own gun. He was her live-in boyfriend, if you want to call him that. Apparently the local hospital has a record of her being treated a year prior for bruises, cuts, burns, and a broken arm and collarbone. The collarbone was so bad she needed surgery. All of them listed as slip and fall accidents."

"Bull shit," Gabe groaned. He shut his eyes to the flood of horrid images that news conjured, and all the ways a man could hurt a woman. Especially sexually. "That explains some things. What else?"

"That's it, buddy. Like I said, she's clean except for the hospital stay. No evidence she's trying to ream your dad over. She's not the type."

Gabe ran his hand over his mouth, not enjoying the bitter aftertaste of Steve's search results. "Thanks. I owe you a big one for this."

Steve chuckled. "You bet you do. And some day, I'm gonna collect."

"I look forward to that day. Did you find anything about that other little problem I asked you to look into?"

"Still working that one. I might have something by the end of the week, but nothing concrete yet. I'm tailing. I'll keep you informed."

"Alright. Send me the info and her doctor's contact number by email."

There was a long pause on Steve's end, then a sigh that Gabe knew so well, meaning his friend thought he shouldn't be snooping around. "Gabe, you know this is breaking the law. I'm going way off the deep end here. What's your interest in this woman? Did she do something to piss you off?"

"No. There's just some things I have to know about her. G'night." He hung up the phone.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

This wasn't going the way he expected. Gabe thought he had Lilly all figured out and neatly pegged into a hole. Finding out about the dead boyfriend, *damn!* Too bad she'd already killed him. Shooting him was way too easy a death for that bastard. Gabe clenched and unclenched his hands, itching to beat the man into a shapeless, bloody pulp.

He needed to clear his head and think now. Steve's information raised more questions than he expected. It raised more issues within himself he wasn't quite ready to sort through either. They prickled with uncomfortable heat around the edge of his conscience and made him edgy, ready for a fight. But with whom? And over what? He wasn't sure.

Gabe ambled up to the table again, careful to keep his gaze off Lilly. She looked way too happy right now, enjoying another one of Carlo's bad jokes about tenderfoot cowboys.

"If you don't mind too much," he said, interrupting Carlo. "I'll be heading into my office for some paperwork. Catch you all later."

They nodded good-bye to him and resumed exchanging jokes. Gabe walked into the house and down to his office next to the family room. He shut the glass paned doors behind him, something he didn't often do unless he wanted privacy. Normally, he kept his office doors open.

This new knowledge about Lilly changed things a bit; his whole perspective on her had been turned upside down. How was he supposed to handle having this attractive woman in

the house for a whole fucking month! Guessing she was some scheming whore with her sights set on Dad had given him a clear path for her destruction. But now? What the hell was he supposed to do?

*Nothing.* His conscience jabbed him sharply. *You're engaged to Amanda Pierce, remember that?* She's the most gorgeous woman you've ever met. The woman you plan to marry. She will be the mother of your children some day. Keep your hands off Lilly, stuff your cock down where it belongs and leave her the hell alone.

Which wouldn't be so hard except for the fact that Lilly's sweet smell burned inside his brain and stirred his blood. When he looked out into the velvet night sky it was her midnight blue eyes he saw. And it was her soft skin and lips he craved. His fingertips yearned to reclaim those full breasts, feel their luscious weight filling his palms, to run his thumbs across her firm, pink buds and suck them into his mouth. He wanted to hear her whimper with need for him, the way she did that night on the terrace. To feel her body vibrate from the inside out while he fucked her long and slow.

*You're an idiot, Gabe. Go ahead, torture yourself some more.*

He tried to remember Amanda's breasts, their shape, size, the color of her nipples and realized he couldn't. He jacked off every day and night in between seeing her once a week. Since asking her to marry him, she'd become more affectionate physically, but less so emotionally. He blamed it on the stress of planning 'the perfect wedding'. She was buried deep into those details, which had grown from 'just a

few hundred' to over five hundred guests now. He cringed at the ordeal and thanked God she and her busybody mother had taken control of everything.

Amanda was scheduled to arrive at the ranch in less than two weeks to attend the Granite Springs rodeo with him. How would she react to finding Lilly here? Right now, Amanda didn't know he was living and practically sleeping one bedroom away from another attractive, available woman. Would Amanda be jealous? Would she demand that he move back to New York with her until Lilly left the ranch?

The possibility of making Amanda jealous made him curious. His fiancée was normally cool and unruffled, even when other women cast their hungry eyes his way in public. Perhaps it was her confidence in her own drop-dead gorgeous looks. What woman would *dare* try to compete with her for the attention of a man? He knew the fire ignited by jealousy, but strangely didn't feel that possessive over Amanda. Why not? Shouldn't he be? Not having the immediate answer concerned him. That posed another prickly problem he needed to resolve, and part of the reason why he'd asked Steve to keep an eye on her while he was minding business at the ranch.

When he compared his relationship with Amanda to the one his parents had, he found the differences too stark and very lacking.

He flicked on his computer and logged in, waiting for the connection to take so he could read Steve's email about Lilly. When it popped up on his screen, he opened the attachment and read her file in detail.

*Son of a bitch!* The bastard had tortured her mercilessly. A cold rage burned inside him as he read further. How did an intelligent woman allow a man to do that to her body for so long, or at all? As a man, it didn't make sense to him. He needed to speak with Dr. Morrison ... in person. Would she do it? Breaking the patient-doctor confidentiality could cost her license. He would have to be extremely discreet. Even then, it wasn't a guarantee she'd give him any useful information on Lilly.

He was scheduled to fly to New York to see Amanda on Friday. What if he flew in early? Could he squeeze in a meeting with Lilly's psychiatrist? After that he could surprise Amanda, maybe take her to one of her favorite fancy restaurants. She liked surprises. Hopefully he'd have his feelings about her sorted through and solidified then too.

Until then, he'd play it cool with the hot little artist. He didn't need her to remind him he was engaged and to keep his hands to himself.

After making a call to Dr. Anna Morrison's office and leaving a message on her phone mail system, Gabe spent the better part of the evening working on his accounting for the ranch.

It was after midnight by the time he finished paying bills, issuing invoices and ordering supplies. The never-ending task of managing a large working ranch took an amazing amount of time to do right, and he prided himself on being detail oriented and keeping meticulous records.

Gabe turned down the lights and left the office. As he walked across the silent house, from family room to living

room, he noticed one lamp left on in the family room and a small figure huddled in a corner of the leather couch. He angled over, guessing by the shining chestnut hair that it had to be Lilly. What the hell was she doing down here instead of being safely tucked into her own bed upstairs? He peeked over the edge of the couch, stepping lightly so as not to wake her.

She slept curled up against a plaid pillow with a thick, blue chenille robe wrapped halfway around her body. Her legs were bare, exposed to mid-thigh by the gray cotton t-shirt she wore underneath. He moved silently around to the front of the couch. A sketchpad lay on the floor along with several charcoal pencils. He still had her sketchpad from earlier, so she must have dragged out a brand new one to use. He tipped his head to see the drawing on it.

It was a detailed sketch of the family room wall and surrounding furnishings. She had notes written all over it; color suggestions, sizes and dimensions, questions about light sourcing and wall brackets for mounting a very large painting. He stared at it, mesmerized by the amount of detail she'd captured and the perspective of the large room she invoked with a few, precise strokes of her pencils.

He glanced down at her sleeping face. She seemed much younger in slumber, like a girl almost. With her red hair hanging loose over one shoulder and her rosy lips parted innocently, he couldn't help the urge to reach out and gently stroke her soft cheek.

Instead of waking up, Lilly murmured something incoherent and turned her face away from his caress. Long,



golden-tipped lashes fanned across the pale skin beneath her eyes. Her brows knitted with hidden, unknown frustration and she burrowed deeper into the couch. When she moved, the robe fell away from her shoulder and exposed a small scar.

A surgical wound, like the one described in Steve's email. The thin line on her skin marked the entry point for the pin her doctor used to put her bones back together. The same cold rage that burned inside him earlier flared back to life now, with more fury than ever. Here was evidence of her abuse at the hands of a man she lived with and probably thought she loved at some point.

Why hadn't she fought back? Or left the bastard after the first time he hit her?

Those were two questions he desperately wanted answers to. It made no sense to him and he hoped a visit with Dr. Morrison would explain it. He needed to figure out how to broach the subject with her doctor and not get thrown into the slammer for trying something so illegal.

Lilly must never find out how deeply he invaded her privacy. And he still had to muddle through the reason why he felt so compelled to do this in the first place. Logic dictated he not be concerned beyond basic human caring for another. Yet he suspected this concern he had went deeper. He just needed to figure out why.

He picked up the sketchpad and laid it across her lap. Then he pulled the robe up over her shoulder, tucked it around her bare knees and lifted her off the couch. She cuddled right up into his chest, her slender hands curled beneath her chin. He stifled a sudden groan. *Ah, hell.* It felt so good to hold her

Evening Star  
*by Rita Sable*

close. How could any man beat and abuse such a beautiful woman?

Lilly's sleepy warmth seeped into the muscles of his arms, making him tighten his hold on her. Her fresh-as-morning-dew scent floated up into a fog in his brain. He didn't even pretend not to enjoy it while he carried her up the stairs. For one fleeting moment, he thought about laying her down in his own bed. But then his conscience bit him again. That would not be fair—to her, to Amanda. And not to himself. He stepped past his own door and headed for the guestrooms she occupied.

## CHAPTER NINE

Lilly jerked awake at four in the morning. At first she was disoriented upon opening her eyes in a strange room, neatly tucked under the quilt but still wrapped in her old chenille bathrobe. She didn't remember crawling into bed, or even walking up the stairs to this bedroom last night.

Only Gabe had still been awake in the house, working in his office when she went down to do a quick sketch of the family room. She'd tried not to disturb him. Lying in the dark now, her heart fluttered nervously inside her ribcage at the memory of that soul-baring kiss he branded onto her lips and into her blood. And of his well-defined, hard body pressed against hers from chest to toe when they'd danced on the patio. She closed her eyes and buried her face into the pillow as a familiar ache settled between her thighs.

Dr. Morrison's embarrassing 'prescription' echoed in her mind. *"Touch yourself, Lilly. Learn what you like, only then can you accept the touch of another man. It's perfectly natural and healthy to pleasure yourself."*

Had Gabe carried her to bed?

The thought frightened and intrigued her. She remembered the feel of his strong arms the first time he carried her away from the broken glass. How safe and protected she'd felt, although frightened out of her wits at the same time.

He'd been so incredibly gentle. Persistent, but gentle. His large hands captured and teased her sensitive flesh to the

point she simply forgot to resist, could not resist the growing arousal inside herself. What pleasure it had been to forget!

Determined not to be embarrassed now by what she needed to do, she spread her thighs and slipped her hands inside her cotton panties. It was easy to remember how good his fingers felt inside her pussy. Hard, probing, dipping in and out of her vagina, slick with her own creamy heat. She toyed with the delicate, silky inner lips that covered her core, parting them slowly, languishing in the fiery sensations that flickered and spread through her pouting, moist flesh. She sank first one, and then two fingers inside herself. She felt stretched but not quite filled. Starting slow, she moved her fingers inside her tight sheath.

*"...you are so tight,"* his rumbling, sexy voice murmured inside her memory. *"How long's it been since you had a man inside you?"*

She copied the way he'd done it that night, the way she remembered his fingers pumping in and out, the broad pad of his thumb teasing over the hot nub of her clit.

Five strokes she counted. He'd given her five, firm, delicious strokes in and out of her core before she reached her strongest climax. Shuddering now and biting her lip from the milder wave of self-pleasure, she relished the tremors that sucked and squeezed her own fingers. She had never come with a man's cock inside her. Would it feel good to him, to have her slick, inner channel sucking and squeezing the thick length of his cock while he pumped himself hard and deep into her body?

She slipped her fingers out and gently smoothed her hot juice over her still-quivering mound, combing through the soft curls until her heart slowed back down to normal. It got easier each time she masturbated. Perhaps the good doctor had been right about this form of self-healing.

Feeling energized now, she reached over to turn on the lamp near the bed. Her sketchpad lay there, and on a clean page was a note written by a hand she didn't recognize.

*Lilly, Come to the barn after breakfast. I'll show you around the ranch so you don't get lost.*

*Hope you slept well,  
Gabe*

Dammit! She threw the quilt covering aside and stood up, not sure what to do or how to respond to his request. No, it was an *order*, not a request. She didn't need a chaperone—that much was certain. If she had a question, she'd ask Marta or even one of the ranch hands for help. Gabe shouldn't be allowed to take charge of her life while she was here and she wouldn't let him dictate to her. He had no reason to seek her out. He's engaged, he's taboo. She could fantasize all she wanted about him, but that was all! She had a job to do here, and plenty little time to do it.

Feeling confident that the torture of being near him, of verbally sparring and defending herself from him had ended, she headed to the shower. Since her body clock was still on the Eastern Time Zone, she'd be getting a head start on the day. Her first order of business was to organize all of her painting supplies and establish her studio in the adjoining

guest room. There was a lot of preparatory work to be done before she could even start painting.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later Lilly drove the last screw into the oversized wooden easel she'd constructed. Working as quietly as possible, she didn't use her cordless screwdriver until she heard noises downstairs. She set the drill aside and stood up to admire her handiwork. It was by far the largest one she'd ever put together. A measure of pride flowed through her now that the easel was completed. The next step was to construct the actual canvas, using a wooden framed backing and a very large section of heavy linen material that she would stretch, trim and nail down over the frame until it was taut. Then she would liberally spread gesso, her own special mixture of finely ground white marble dust and non-yellowing silicone glue, across the tight canvas. The gesso would seal the linen, strengthen the canvas and prepare it to smoothly accept oil paint. Once applied, the wet canvas required two days to cure.

That would give her two days to decide which angle of the house appealed more to a painting. Every home had its own primary face, an angle that begged for attention more than any other. It was her job to decipher that face. She planned to spend her time outside, studying the house, the landscape around it, the light, shadows and colors of different times of day. These studies would be accomplished first by camera and then with quick watercolor paintings. As soon as the sun lifted from the eastern horizon this morning, she wanted to be

outside to see the effect it had on this house and the magnificent land around it.

She walked over to the window. The southern and western skies were still dark gray, with a tinge of shell pink merging into the cloudless horizon. Below, the lake looked smooth as a polished mirror with a hover of mist softening the starkness. The tallest tips of the mountain peaks were flushed with dark pink and purple, but were not reflected in the lake now due to that soft cover of fog over the water.

God, it was beautiful. In a few minutes, the sun would rise and chase that delicate fog away. Feeling a spur of creativity, she grabbed her camera from the shelf and raced downstairs and out of the house to capture the momentous magic on film.

Lilly had barely stepped out the back door when she saw a lone figure walking purposefully down the pier. She knew immediately it was Gabe. Dressed in a plain gray sweatshirt and baggy pants, his feet bare, he stopped at the end of the pier and leisurely stretched his arms overhead.

*Oh shit!* Marta had mentioned how Gabe liked to swim with the fog.

She resisted the urge to go back into the house, her earlier joy in capturing the mist-covered lake on film dissipating under the unwelcome reminder of his presence. Instead, she walked over to a pine log bench and sat down, resigned to watching the beautiful morning unfold without capturing it on film.

On the quiet pier, Gabe continued to stretch. He performed an intricate, smoothly flowing pattern of strength and core

exercises she recognized as Kata. How strange that a man who worked as a cowboy on this huge ranch would practice an ancient Japanese form of strength-training calisthenics. She learned mental calming and control through yoga from the YWCA. Every Thursday night, the Kata classes were taught at the same time in an adjoining exercise room. She'd always found them mesmerizing in the precise patterns of movement that built up in intensity and speed, from slow to blinding fast.

After a long routine, he increased the speed of his Kata drill to include swift strikes and kicks. Behind him, the sun sent the first rays of golden-red light across the horizon, igniting a fiery glow on the mountain peaks and the very tops of trees. He finished his drills, whipped off his sweatshirt and dropped his pants. Lilly gasped.

He stood stark naked. Not even a swimsuit to cover the golden, perfect shape of his tight ass. Gabe gazed down into the water, giving her a long look at the perfection of his body. The chiseled symmetry of his back, buttocks and finely sculpted legs could have been cast by a master's hand. For one split-second she thought about capturing his physical beauty on film. He would make one hell of a model for painting.

But it wasn't right to do so without the model's consent. He had no idea she watched him now. Without warning he dived cleanly into the water from the pier, slicing through the mirrored plane like a gilded knife. He surfaced some distance away and began swimming across the lake with long, confident strokes. The fog swirled and parted as he cut



through it until he got too far for her to see and it swallowed him from sight.

She felt a bit of sadness at not being able to watch him anymore. How long would it take him to reach the far shore and turn back to the pier? She waited, patiently, her camera clutched tight against her belly, hoping he'd return soon so she could see that beautiful body again. It was safe to watch him naked from afar. She could admire the sheer perfection of his male form without feeling overwhelmed by his strong sexuality.

Several interminable minutes of silence passed with nothing but the call of birds stirring in the trees. Would he climb out on the pier, or swim to the shore, closer to where she sat watching him? She grinned with a naughty thought then. Would the cold water affect the size of his cock? Isn't that why men took the proverbial 'cold shower'? She waited, practically holding her breath when the slap and chop of water heralded his return before she could actually see him.

By now the sun touched the pond with its golden warmth, turning the fog to silvery, ethereal wisps. Gabe swam back to the pier, placed his hands on the edge and lifted himself out of the water in one powerful leap. Lilly bit her lip when he stood up. A glorious bronzed Adonis, he raked his fingers through his wet hair. Water sluiced down from his wide chest, down those magnificent abs, across lean hips...

"*Holy Moses,*" she mumbled softly. If the cold lake affected the size of his cock, she couldn't tell. It still hung thick and long between the columns of his legs, not at all tiny or

shriveled as she mischievously thought. Perhaps the water wasn't that cold after all?

Her face warmed with the unbidden image that blossomed in her mind, of what he'd look like naked and fully erect. Would that impressive cock arch all the way up to his navel? She already knew the hard, throbbing feel of it pressed urgently against her belly, even through his jeans.

He picked up his sweatpants and stepped into them. Walking back down the pier, he used his sweatshirt to wipe the remaining wetness from his arms and chest. He was oblivious to the voyeurism she enjoyed, and she intended to keep it that way. She stood and slipped back into the house as unobtrusively as possible. It was time to stop viewing him as a gorgeous piece of art and remember who he really was—a man with a huge sexual appetite who didn't take 'no' for an answer and who had questionable morals where his fiancée was concerned. Lilly wanted no part of that.

\* \* \* \*

Gabe, Carlo and two ranch hands rode the fence line bordering the fifty-acre flat of grass where newly weaned calves spent their first month away from their mamas. From the distance, he thought the calves had gathered up because a predator circled them. He and his men had been working on a new water tank system in the higher pastures. After spying the calves in the distance, huddled in a black knot, he ordered everyone to mount up and galloped flat out to rescue the calves from their attacker.

Wolves and cougar didn't usually bother with the calves, because of how close their pasture was to the house and barn. As they approached the gate, Carlo, Hank and Joe drew rifles from saddle scabbards, fully prepared to shoot whatever creature threatened them.

"Hold up a minute," Gabe reined in his leopard-spotted stallion.

He caught a glimpse of someone moving inside the tight huddle of calves. The shining chestnut hair, without the straw hat, and those long, blue jean covered legs—*Lilly*. What the hell did she think she was doing out in the weanling pasture?

"Put your rifles away, boys," he grimaced. "It's just our guest, Miss Wilcox. Looks like the calves have taken a liking to her."

Carlo chuckled. "Not hard to do, the Senorita is very likeable."

Joe stood up in his stirrups and stretched his thin neck up to get a better view inside the pasture. "Lucky calves."

"That's my thinkin', too." Hank leaned forward in his saddle to get Gabe's attention. "So, we gonna meet the pretty lady we heard about this morning, or not?"

Gabe turned and glared at both Hank and his younger, quieter brother, Joe. "No. You boys go on back to the tanks with Carlo. I'll rescue Miss Wilcox from a bunch of hungry calves."

Carlo studied him with his dark eyes slightly narrowed. It was a look Gabe knew meant he didn't approve of something. "Sure you don't want me to do this?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," Gabe held Carlo's penetrating gaze. "Go on, I'll take care of her. I need to talk with her anyway."

"Okay, you're the boss." Carlo nodded toward the other two men and turned his horse back the way they'd come. Hank and Joe followed him, casting curious eyes out to the pasture where a beautiful young woman needed to be rescued.

Gabe waited for them to ride out some distance before he urged Warrior up to the gate. He opened it and closed it from the saddle, guiding the horse through the intricate maneuver with his legs. Once the gate was closed securely again, he spurred Warrior across the pasture at a gallop.

The calves scattered like black marbles under the speedy approach of the large horse. Lilly shielded her eyes from the sun with one hand, a camera with a zoom lens clutched firmly in the other. She stepped back a few paces while he reined Warrior in close.

"Are you trying to scare me to death?" she shouted, stepping even further from his horse as the animal danced sideways and tossed his head against a tight rein.

"I thought I asked you to meet me at the barn this morning. Or didn't you get my note?"

She took a moment to tuck loose strands of hair behind her ear with a shaky hand. Her eyes squinted off in the distance, toward the house, clearly refusing to look up at him. "Yes, I got your note. But I had other plans already."

"Oh yeah, like what? As far as I can see you're not getting much done standing here with all these calves trying to latch onto your hands and clothes, looking for a suckle."

Lilly blushed a pretty shade of pink and giggled. She turned around to warily watch some of the braver calves inch forward, long tongues and wet noses seeking out her fingers, her elbows, and the tail of her shirt.

"I had no idea they'd try to do this." She held her camera out of the way of one calf's questing, long pink tongue. "Why are they doing this? I thought they'd ignore me while I took some photos to study."

"They've just been weaned from their mamas, that's why. We put them in this pasture together and ignore them for about a month so they get used to it."

She brushed a sleek, black head off her shoulder and swatted another away from her camera. "So, I guess I'm not supposed to be in this pasture, right?"

"Right. Come on, I'll give you a ride up to the house."

Lilly darted away from another, more determined calf. "I can't quit yet. I have to get the sun while it's at this angle in the sky. It's perfect on the house right now."

Gabe wanted to laugh out loud at the way she bravely fought off the curious calves. She had one hand preoccupied by holding her precious camera up and out of their reach, the other busy pushing them away. Did she have any idea how lovely she looked? Her hair gleamed with golden-red highlights under the late afternoon sun, her pale green t-shirt slipped off one shoulder, exposing the white cotton bra strap underneath. And as she twisted and turned to avoid the hungry baby Angus, her hips and thighs swayed seductively in a tight pair of jeans, without conscious effort.

The sight of her made his mouth water. *Damn!* He wanted to run his palms down those hips and feel her thighs part for him while she wrapped those long legs around his waist. Right here in the middle of this pasture, with all the calves as witnesses, he wanted to strip her jeans off and fuck her senseless under the sun. His jeans tightened uncomfortably across his crotch. He shifted in his saddle. Warrior tossed his head, obviously sensing the tight change in Gabe's body.

"Alright." He cleared his throat. "If you absolutely can't stop what you're doing, then let me show you where you can take your pictures. Without the bovines getting in your way."

She glanced up suspiciously. "Where? Can I walk there?"

"No. It would take you too long, and your sun would be gone." He allowed a lazy grin to play on his lips. "You'll have to climb up behind me, and I'll take you there."

## CHAPTER TEN

Lilly viewed the gorgeous white and black spotted horse Gabe rode with a sense of wonder. She would love to ride this horse, but not with Gabe in the saddle too. That would be too much to bear.

She reached out and stroked the soft, velvety nose, but shook her head all the same. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?" Gabe leaned one arm across the saddle horn and tipped his black Stetson up with a finger. "He's well-trained. He won't hurt you."

The horse might be well trained, but Gabe sure wasn't. Not with those hands. Not the way he took control of her body so easily. His mocking grin and challenging gaze rattled her composure.

She must keep her distance from this attractive man. Sitting behind him in the saddle with her breasts pressed tight against his back and her thighs spread wide to cup his ass would only weaken her resolution. It was bad enough she'd already seen his gorgeous ass naked, no way was she going to rub her pussy against it. That was asking for trouble. Her fantasies about him were hot enough. No sense in teasing her body with what she couldn't have.

"It's not the horse I'm afraid of." There, she admitted it to him. Her cheeks flushed with warmth that couldn't be mistaken for the heat of the day.

She turned away and began walking the distance back to the fence. The nosy calves followed, some of them bouncing along with playful little bucks that she had to be careful of and quick to dodge. While she walked, she stuffed her camera back into its protective bag and slung it over her shoulder to free her hands, making it much easier to push and shoo the calves out of her path. She heard Gabe cluck to his horse.

Suddenly all the calves scattered again, darting in every direction to avoid Gabe's horse as he spurred in front of her, blocking her path.

"Get out of my way," she grumbled and moved to the left to go around him. The horse spun in that direction, again blocking her path. She huffed in exasperation. "What are you doing?"

"Me? Nothin'. Warrior's a cutting horse, trained to keep a calf, or a filly in this case, right in front of his nose. Come on up here, sugar. I won't bite you."

The horse's ear flicked up at her as if to emphasize his rider's point. She could feel the edge of her temper beginning to sizzle, something she rarely allowed to happen. "Would you stop calling me 'sugar'? Just get out of my way so I can finish my work. It's getting late and you're wasting my time."

Gabe looked off into the distance, toward the high peaks of the mountain range that surrounded the Evening Star ranch. "Yeah, the daylight is shifting already. Fall's coming soon, days are getting shorter and shorter. And we're gonna' stand here all day until you give in."

She rubbed her palm across her forehead, wiping away the sweat that beaded there. He was taunting her. Why did every



man she was attracted to have to do this to her? She bit her bottom lip, desperate to keep the tremble from it. The urge to run away and cry tugged at her heart with painful, deep claws.

*No!* She had to face this problem now. A ragged moan slipped past her lips. She turned her back to him, preferring to look at the cute black calves that stared back at her with large, innocent, long lashed eyes.

"I wish you'd leave me alone," she said over her shoulder. "I don't know what it is you want from me."

"All I want is to give you a ride up to a pretty view of the house. Warrior can get us there in five minutes."

"It's not right." Her breath hitched as she fought the prickle of tears in her eyes. "You're engaged. Your behavior toward me is inappropriate. How would your fiancée feel if she saw the way you kissed me on the pier yesterday, the way you danced with me? Does she know you carried me to my room last night and tucked me into bed? Don't you care about her feelings? If I were her I know I'd be heartbroken. And I don't want any part of breaking another woman's heart."

There was silence from him, only the metallic chewing sound of Warrior mouthing his bit. Had she offended Gabe now? Served him right! He needed to be reminded of his pre-married status, something he took entirely too lightly. She began to wonder if he still planned to have this little stand off with her, and not acknowledge the fact of his infidelities at all.

"Lilly." His voice sounded pained, as if she'd kicked him where it really hurt. "Look at me. Come on, sugar, turn around so I can explain..."

"Just leave me alone, Gabe!"

After several unbearable, long seconds during which she counted her own heartbeats, he suddenly turned his horse away and spurred the stallion back to the fence at a furious pace. Only then did she allow the hot flood of tears to spill over her lashes. She watched through blurry eyes while he raced his magnificent horse up the hills, until they were a speck of movement against an ocean of grass and criss-crossing fences.

Her head ached from squinting in the sun all afternoon without her hat. No doubt the argument with Gabe didn't help it either. She swiped the backs of her hands across her wet cheeks, angry with herself for feeling such loss when he wasn't even hers to lose.

After a few deep breaths, she rearmed herself with fresh determination to pick up and keep working. She scanned the view of the house now. The sun had dropped to a point in the sky where it cast long shadows across it from a steep angle. The contrast was too deep. Sighing with both mental and physical fatigue, she hiked her camera bag higher onto her shoulder and resumed walking back to the gate, her baby Angus entourage in tow.

\* \* \* \*

She didn't see Gabe that evening at all. He was mysteriously absent from the informal dinner table she

shared with Marta and Carlo in the kitchen. Lilly insisted it was a good thing too, because she still felt raw and sensitive about what happened between them in the pasture.

Marta was her normal talkative self, happily carrying the conversation for all three of them. Lilly smiled and nodded at Marta's self-contained speech, with her mind only one-half focused on her words. Carlo cast speculative and thoughtful glances her way during the meal. He maintained his charming smile and politely topped off her red wine whenever she sipped at it.

Even though the meal of sauteed beef tips with mushrooms and grilled mixed vegetables looked divine, smelled heavenly and tasted wonderful, Lilly's appetite had deserted her. The mild headache from earlier had grown into a full-blown brain throb. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose were sunburned and her feet hurt from the blisters earned while walking in canvas sneakers without socks all day. She wanted nothing more than to go to bed early after a cool shower and a couple of aspirin.

Instead of excusing herself, she forced herself to eat everything on her plate. Marta would be offended and probably fuss unnecessarily if she knew she wasn't feeling well. And Carlo looked like he had a whole slew of questions burning inside his mysterious dark eyes—questions Lilly knew would be uncomfortable to answer. She already had a sneaking suspicion Gabe's mood had been foul when he rejoined his men. Carlo was probably wondering what she'd said to upset him. Of course it was perfectly natural for him to want to protect Gabe.

"Oh, my poor Gabriel." Marta moaned around a mouthful. "It's not like him to leave so suddenly. Did he say who called him back to New York?"

Lilly's attention perked with Marta's mention of New York. Had Gabe left the ranch?

"Didn't say who," Carlo murmured around a corn muffin. "It was probably Amanda, she is having some trouble with wedding plans or something."

A worried frown settled into Marta's brow. "Oh, that poor girl. I can't imagine trying to arrange a wedding for so many people. Gabe should be with her now. It's good that he went."

Carlo nodded and took a long drink of his wine. "Yes, maybe it will take his mind off his problems here at home. He's ornerier than a bull with a shock-rod tied to his tail. I can't figure out why."

Did he make a point to look at her when he said that last statement? Or was she imagining it due to her own paranoia? It didn't matter. Gabe was headed to his fiance's side, where he should be and where she told him to go. It should make her happy to know that he actually heeded her advice and that she wouldn't be the cause of a rift between the soon-to-be-married couple.

So, why did she feel so depressed about it? She tried to put herself in his fiancée's place, imagining how happy she'd be to see him again, how thrilling the reunion would be in his arms, with his hungry, deep kiss on her lips.

*Yes, Lilly girl, you did the right thing. Stop moping about something you never had.*

She stood up and helped Marta carry dishes to the dishwasher. "Marta, thank you for a delicious dinner. If you both will excuse me, I have some work to finish in my studio upstairs. I'll see you in the morning."

Marta bobbed around in her kitchen, blissfully oblivious to the empty pain that shrouded Lilly's heart. She nodded goodnight to Carlo and quickly made her escape.

She'd barely reached the bottom of the stairs when Carlo's deep voice called out to her.

"Senorita Lilly, I may speak to you for a moment?"

She halted in mid-stride and forced a benign smile on her mouth before turning to him. "Sure. Is there a problem?"

Carlo tipped his head sideways to study her, the inky black depths of his eyes full of compassion and tenderness. "Walk with me to the office. I have something for you."

"Ah, sure," she nodded, and allowed him to guide her the short distance to Gabe's office next to the family room.

Once inside, he motioned for her to take a seat on a leather chair in front of the desk and computer equipment. She quickly scanned the room and gauged it to be a real place of business. Bookshelves lined one wall behind the desk, stacked with accounting ledgers and textbooks on law and agriculture.

"You are not feeling well?" Carlo asked, surprising her.

Lilly shook her head. "No. I mean, yes, I'm fine. I think I've had too much sun today, that's all."

Carlo reached into a desk drawer and withdrew her straw hat, sketchpad and pencils that she'd forgotten at the lake yesterday—after Gabe kissed her.

"Gabe gave these to me before he left to drive to the airport. He insists you wear the hat from now on. With your fair skin, *Senorita*, it's a good idea, yes?"

She took them from him. "Thank you. I wondered where I'd left these. I guess he found them by the lake."

"Yes." Carlo's cheek twitched ever so slightly with an uncertain smile. "Be careful. The sun is hot. I don't want you to get burned either, *Senorita*."

A more obvious warning, however gently given, could not have struck her as hard as this one did. She swallowed the dry lump in her throat. "Thanks. I'll try to remember that."

He closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. "I know. He also said I was to give you a horse to ride. You will come to the barn tomorrow morning and meet her. Okay?"

"A horse ... oh, but I haven't ridden in many years, Carlo. The horses you have here are much more spirited than anything I've ever seen."

"You will get along well with this horse. She is very calm. *Dancer* is an older mare and she'll take good care of a beginner like you. Trust her. The *Evening Star* is too large to walk from end to end without tiring yourself out. *Dancer* will be happy to have a job."

A small thrill and joy bubbled inside Lilly's heart. How exciting it would be to ride again! "Okay, I will come to the barn tomorrow morning. Thank you, Carlo."

"De nada, *Senorita*. But you can thank Gabe. She belongs to him and he's never given her to anyone else. She is the mother of his champion stallion, *Warrior*. A more magnificent

leopard Appaloosa doesn't exist on Earth right now, thanks to Dancer."

Lilly's eyes widened. "Are you sure I should ride her then? She sounds quite valuable."

"Yes. Dancer is wise. Gabe knows this and he trusts her to take care of you when you ride. I also have instructions to have Marta take you shopping in Granite Springs when she goes this weekend. You will enjoy that, yes?"

She blinked at him. "Gabe told you I needed to go shopping?"

"No, George did. He called this morning."

"Oh. Ah ... sure. I didn't really have time to do that before I left New York." The thought actually had some appeal since she hadn't shopped for new clothes in ages. At least now she had some money in her bank account to spend a little on herself. "I need to drop off some film for developing anyway, so that will work out perfectly."

"Good. Marta will be thrilled to have another woman to shop with. It is her secret passion, so let me warn you now, she is tireless. You may have to drag her back home before the stores close."

She giggled at the image of vivacious Marta on a shopping spree with a reluctant Carlo in tow. The last clothes Lilly bought were ordered from catalogs. One thing she quickly learned about big city living was that large, impersonal and over-the-top-priced stores were not to her liking at all. A trip to a small town with a loveable woman who enjoyed shopping sounded like fun.

"I'm glad you spare me the torture, Senorita." Carlo walked over to her chair and gently took her hand in both of his, patting it softly. "You will tell me if there is anything I can do for you? I will enjoy helping you, with anything or anyone. Okay?"

Lilly stood up and nodded. "Thanks. You and Marta have already been a big help to me. I'm very grateful, of course."

"Nonsense." Carlo shook his head. "You are welcome here. And tomorrow, I will have the pleasure of your company around my favorite horses, and I can introduce you to all of our nice cowboys. They are very eager to meet a pretty girl."



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gabe stepped off the jet at the municipal airport outside New York City limits and headed straight to the dull gray Ford sedan idling in his father's private parking space. Only a P.I. could appreciate the full camouflage effect of that car. Steve had explained to him many times before, the beauty of a non-descript car like that one was that people didn't look at it twice. It attracted no attention, blended in with traffic, and was the perfect tailing vehicle.

His working car was a standard joke between them. It didn't matter that Steve owned a brand new Maserati, a classic Ferrari and one huge, ugly Hummer. He loved and collected exotic sports cars. But this old Ford was his "working car."

Gabe opened the passenger side door and slid in. "I see you still have this old rust bucket."

Steve's lip curled. "Good to see you, too, buddy. I see you're still shunning the joys of commercial airliners."

They both laughed and shook hands. Even after not having seen each other in two years, they slipped into the comfortable camaraderie of men who knew, trusted and respected each other. At an even six feet tall, Steve was a good two inches shorter than Gabe. He kept himself supremely fit and well muscled with weight lifting. His dusty-brown hair was cropped short, never allowed to grow any longer since his time as a Marine. Dressed in khaki slacks, loafers and a loose-fitting, dark brown Polo shirt, he looked

more like a tourist rather than a damn good private investigator.

Steve maneuvered the Ford through thick interstate traffic with practiced ease, heading back into the city. "You feeling all right? I could drop you off at your dad's place first, if you want to shower and change."

"No. I slept on the plane. I just want to get this over with." Gabe brushed his palm across the stubble on his chin. He felt gritty and angry. Too angry to waste time on preliminaries like taking a shower and putting on fresh clothes. "You gonna show me the pics now, or do I have to wait?"

"Glove compartment." Steve nodded his head once in that direction, keeping his eyes on traffic.

Gabe popped it open and pulled out a plain manila envelope. He took a deep breath before opening it, knowing that once he did and actually saw the evidence of Amanda's affair printed in black and white, it would be all over for him.

He slid his fingers inside and pulled out a slick photo sheet. There were at least a dozen small vignette photos printed on it, in sequence apparently. And each one, though small, was easy to see and decipher.

Amanda Pierce, the woman he thought he loved and asked to marry him, was still fucking Mark Tallinger, the man she'd been dating before him. Those were her slender legs wrapped around his pale ass, it was her face, her mouth thrown open wide in the throes of passion. The telephoto lens Steve had used didn't allow for much distortion. The pictures of them in bed together were crystal clear. He didn't want to know which hotel they used, or which day these photos had been taken.

He stuffed the photo sheet back into the envelope and folded it in half.

Steve glanced at him a few times. "You okay?"

Gabe didn't answer right away. He clenched his jaw so tight he could hear the muscles pulling on tendons and bones inside his head. "I will be, buddy. I will be. So, where is she meeting him today?"

"Antonino's Trattoria, on thirty-eighth. They have a standing reservation every Thursday at two for a cozy little table in the corner. Or so the cute little hostess at the place tells me."

"Good. I can't wait to hear her bluff her way out of this," Gabe held up the envelope.

They rode in mutual silence through the usual traffic snarls and heavy pedestrian crowds of mid-day in downtown Manhattan. Steve was a patient driver, whereas Gabe wanted to ram every car that braked in front of them.

Steve pulled right in front of the small restaurant and double-parked. "How do you want to handle this? I can wait here, or drive around the block a few times."

Gabe glanced at his watch. "This shouldn't take long, but probably better if you drive around a couple times. I'll meet you out here in fifteen minutes."

He got out of Steve's car and stuffed the incriminating envelope into the pocket inside his jacket before heading up to Antonino's elaborate leaded glass and red-painted door. Once inside, a stylish young woman with sleek, lemon-blond hair and sultry amber eyes greeted him.

"Good afternoon and welcome to Antonino's. A late lunch, sir?"

Gabe scanned the sophisticated, intimate interior of the restaurant. There were only one or two empty tables. The crowd here epitomized the business clients who swarmed into the city each morning only to desert it at night. He spotted Amanda immediately because of how much she stood out from the business crowd. Her free-flowing, long golden hair and stylish suit spoke of the independently wealthy young heiress she was, not a business person.

"Thanks," he smiled at the pretty hostess. "I need to speak to the lady and her gentleman friend at that corner table for a moment. I don't need a menu."

He pinned his attention on Amanda and zeroed in on her table, wending his way through the restaurant. He dodged waiters in crisp white shirts carrying trays of fragrant, steaming meals high above their shoulders.

Amanda's profile was as gorgeous as he ever remembered. Dressed in body conscious, 'look-at-me' Burberry plaid with a short-short skirt that slid seductively up her elegant bare thighs, she crossed her legs and leaned in to speak to her lover. Gabe's gut clenched when he spied the man's hand caress her knee under the table. The man whispered something to her and she threw her head back, exposing that smooth white throat and a tinkling laugh.

Gabe pulled a chair out from an empty table and set it directly opposite from Amanda. They both startled with awareness.

"Hey, you can't..." Her lover began to object. The man's eyes widened with recognition and his mouth hung slack.

"Hello, Amanda." Gabe grinned, allowing all his teeth to show. "Miss me?"

Slick and smooth as ever. She recovered quickly. The barest flicker of shock and deception flitted across her perfect, porcelain features. Her cool blue gaze darted over his finger-combed hair and the faint stubble on his chin. He knew she hated it when he didn't shave everyday. It irritated her sensitive skin to be burned by his beard growth.

"Gabe." She smiled slowly, a forced, hesitant smile. "What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you, but what a nice surprise. You remember Mark Tallinger, don't you?"

"Sure thing," Gabe reached across and offered his hand to Mark. "Good to meet you again. I'm Amanda's fiancee."

Mark's face flushed. He was obviously not as adept at hiding his shock as she was. He was foolish enough to accept Gabe's extended hand. "Ah, yes. How are you?"

Gabe grasped it—hard. He squeezed as if the life-blood were bleeding out from every crack inside his heart. The sudden pallor on Mark's face and twitch of alarm on his handsome, smooth mouth reminded Gabe to not break every finger in his hand. As much as he didn't want to, he let go, pleased to see the pained expression in the other man's eyes.

"Mark," he growled, "do yourself a favor—beat it. I need to have a word with Amanda."

To his credit, Mark didn't waste any time in getting up from the table. He took a second to straighten his impeccably tailored black suit jacket.

"I'll see you later." He shrugged apologetically toward Amanda and turned away without looking back once.

*Fucking wimp*, Gabe thought.

"That was very rude, Gabe," Amanda huffed. She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms in front of her lush breasts so the cleavage swelled inside the deep V of her jacket.

At any other time, he would have felt like a starving man being offered a banquet. Her skin was milky smooth and satiny soft. She wore her hair tucked behind her ears to expose her high cheekbones and large, slanted, blue-gray eyes. He used to think he craved the feel of her pouting, wide mouth under his.

"Rude?" He let the grin fall away. "From what I could see, he was being a mite too eager to feel his way up to your pussy. And you're not wearing any panties, are you?"

She spread her legs under the table, the tips of her high-heeled pumps brushing lightly against his legs in a blatantly seductive manner. "Why don't you find out for yourself, since you're so sure?"

Gabe picked up a breadstick from the basket on the table and bit into it. "No thanks. Why don't you tell me about this instead?"

He opened his jacket and slid the envelope out and handed it to her. Her slim, French manicured fingers trembled with a hint of nerves. He munched nonchalantly on the breadstick while she opened it and peered inside. Her lashes fluttered wide for a split second before the veil of deceit fell across her face again. She resealed the envelope and set it down on the table between them, refusing to meet his gaze.

"Why'd you do it?" he asked finally. "Why say 'yes' to marrying me, when it's pretty obvious to me now you're not interested either?"

She snickered and withdrew her legs. "You're saying you're not interested in me? Come on, Gabe, I'm the best thing to happen to you in a long time. Isn't it obvious? I give you the high style and glitz your position in life demands. And you give me the stability and social status I want from my life. It's not that hard to understand, is it now, sweetheart?"

He couldn't believe her cynicism. He tossed the half-eaten breadstick down on the table. It tasted like dust on his tongue. "No, it wasn't obvious to me. I really did believe we could have made a real marriage out of it. Guess I was both wrong and a fool for believing that fairy tale. Thank you, Amanda."

Gabe held out his hand to her. Her thin eyebrows dropped into a puzzled frown. Slowly she extended her right hand to him. He closed his eyes briefly and shook his head.

"Other hand," he ordered softly.

Amanda hesitated. Her lips parted as if to say something but her breath caught before slowly letting it out. She gave him her left hand.

He curled her fingers inside his, admiring the brilliant flash and sparkle of the five carat oval diamond engagement ring he'd given her a few months ago. She'd picked it out, on a day when he thought his life would be forever bound by her extraordinary beauty and sharp, entertaining wit.

"Don't," she breathed the word. "We can work through this, Gabe. Other couples have problems, too. Don't do this. Let's talk some more, at my place. Please?"

Gently he traced his finger over her pale knuckles and soft skin. She took immaculate care of her body, indulging it and pampering it to keep herself as smooth and wrinkle-free as possible. In a few years, she'd be undergoing the first of many plastic surgeries to eliminate the test of time on her perfect face.

"You know what I want, Amanda. I've never lied to you about it. You've tiptoed around my desires, supplicating and pretending they don't exist. But they do. I need to know one thing. Did you ever intend to move out to the ranch with me? Or did you play make-believe and fool yourself into thinking I'd give up my lifestyle and move to the city after we got married?"

"I, well, I know how much you love the ranch life, Gabe. But, I enjoy the city. I just thought ... maybe, we could live both here and there. You know, I'd come here when I needed to and fly out to the ranch when you needed me there."

He nodded, totally understanding what she said. "I don't want a part-time wife. I want her in my bed to make love to her every night, not once in a while when she comes to visit me, or when I ask her to be there. I want my wife there willingly. I want a partner, someone who's there all the time, to share the day-to-day experiences with. Maybe what you want could work. With another man, Amanda."

She tightened her fingers so he couldn't twist the diamond ring off. "No. Listen to me, you stupid man. I gave you the



best fucks of your life. You should be grateful that I agreed to marry you. All you want to be is a God-damned cowboy when what you could be is like your father, in a position of power and fame."

"I'm not interested in power and fame, Amanda. You've always known that, I've never hidden who I am from you. You lied to yourself and to me. If that's what you want, you'll have the chance now to find it. Our engagement is over."

With a simple tug, the diamond ring came off and he clasped it tightly inside his palm. Amanda snatched her hand back and hid both of them under the tablecloth, a hot spot of color on her cheeks marring the perfect complexion she was so proud of. Her eyes darted nervously around to the other tables. He knew she was concerned about other people seeing this.

"Fine. We're done, Gabe." Her eyes narrowed like hot gems. "Just wait, you'll come crawling back to me. You'll be sorry you did this."

The ring burned a hole into his palm. He hated the damned thing and wanted to throw it against the far wall. "I'm already sorry, about everything. About being so fuckin' blind for four months when I knew all along something wasn't right between us. I couldn't put my finger on it. Now you're free Amanda. Go find your power and fame with some other man. Goodbye."

He stood up and walked away from her, feeling the hot sting of her angry eyes searing into his back the whole way. He managed another smile for the pretty hostess who held the door open for him.

Outside, there was no sign of Steve parked nearby. He began walking. He needed to do something right now, since the after-burn still simmered inside him. Walking would have to suffice. He jammed his hands inside the pockets of his slacks and stretched long strides across the pavement for a good twenty minutes before he heard a honk behind him.

"Hey! You gonna walk back to the airport, or want a ride?"

He turned toward the familiar voice and slid back into the passenger seat of Steve's old Ford. "Drive. Drop me off at my dad's place. I'll take one of his cars. I need to visit Megan and Scott anyway, now that she's pregnant. I haven't seen her since the wedding."

Gabe knew Steve wouldn't ask for explanations of what happened in the restaurant with Amanda. He simply nodded and drove away, heading for Central Park and the luxurious apartment building where George Abendstern chose to live after his wife had passed away. Gabe saw nothing, heard nothing, only felt the empty, raw mass of nerves that Amanda had finally exposed to the light of day with her words.

When they arrived, Steve pulled up to the gate of the underground garage and waited, patient and quiet. After a few moments he finally asked. "What's the pass code, Buddy?"

Gabe shook himself alert. "Yeah, sorry. Punch in five, nine, zero, zero, two, and the letter A."

The gate lifted and Steve pulled into the garage. He followed the signs indicating which apartment belonged to which parking areas until he found Gabe's family name. He

parked behind the gold Rolls Royce convertible and the black Mercedes G550 SUV. "You need me, you let me know, okay?"

"Thanks. I appreciate what you did for me. You probably saved my damned neck, you know that?"

Steve sighed. "I know. I'm sorry it worked out that way. I really prefer happy endings, but in my line of work most times, they're not."

Gabe reached into his pants pocket and pulled out the diamond ring. "Here, payment for services rendered. You earned it." He dropped it into Steve's hand.

"Whoa, no way. You keep this thing, Gabe. I can't take that."

Gabe got out of the car and shut the door. He walked over to the driver's side and leaned down into the opened window. "You saved my ass from making the biggest mistake of my life. Keep it."

"But what if you decide to marry the next girl? She's gonna want something like this."

For the first time since leaving Montana late yesterday, Gabe felt a bit of healing light enter his dark world. Lilly. Her pretty face and honest, deep blue eyes gazing up at him from the sunny pasture—before she'd turned her back on him. He hurt when her voice choked up with tears, vowing not to break his fiancée's heart. He couldn't even consider giving her Amanda's leftovers.

Gabe shook his head. "Take it back to Harry Winston's. Tell him I sent you and he'll give you a full refund on it. Go buy yourself a Ferrari or two. So the next time I see you, I won't have to ride in this old bucket of bolts."

Evening Star  
*by Rita Sable*

Steve tucked the diamond into his pocket. "I might just do that. It would be fun to see you curl your big body into the tight cockpit of my Ferrari. Take care, buddy."

Gabe waved him off and headed to the elevator, determined to wash his sour mood down the drain with a long, hot shower.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Lilly dropped the reins, grabbed the saddle horn and gave Dancer the right to carefully pick her way down the steep, rocky path. The spotted mare had become her trusted companion and friend since their first introduction almost a week ago. Carlo had given her instructions on properly saddling Dancer up so that she could do it without having to bother anyone else. The independence thrilled her. After a quick riding lesson, she turned her new best friend out toward the trails surrounding the higher hills of the Evening Star Ranch.

She'd been out riding most of the day, spending the majority of the afternoon up on the southern slope behind the house, creating sketches to work from later inside her studio. With her saddlebags neatly arranged to hold her camera, watercolor paper, a small jug of water, pencils, brushes, towels, and a packed lunch from the ever-thoughtful Marta, she now had a wonderful sense of accomplishment in the progress of her panoramic painting. At this rate, she'd complete it well in advance of George's requested date for Gabe's birthday party. Having the cushion of extra time gave her both comfort and confidence.

As she rode around a hairpin turn in the path, Dancer suddenly slid to a jarring stop and nearly unseated Lilly. The mare snorted in alarm, her ears pricked forward as she held her proud head high to look across the hill they descended.

"What's up, girl?" Lilly asked quietly.

Hopefully it was just a rabbit or bird that caught the horse's keen sense of sound and smell. Lilly scanned the hillside, trying to judge between the shapes of boulders and brush and the mysterious shadows they created.

A quick, darting movement caught her eye. The mare noticed it too and began to tremble nervously. Lilly caught up the loose reins and held her back, feeling a tight rush of adrenaline surge into her blood.

A cougar cub leapt out from a deep crevice of rock and raced up the hill like a sleek, tawny shadow. Lilly gasped, awestruck and scared senseless at the same time. Was the mother cougar nearby?

She had to have a picture of that cub! Quickly, before she lost her nerve and the trail the cub took, she urged Dancer back up the rock-strewn path to a tree they passed earlier. The mare had barely stopped when Lilly dropped out of the saddle and tied one rein to a tree limb.

"Stay right here. I'll be back in a jiff, okay?" She patted the mare's sweaty neck with shaking hands.

With her camera bag slung over her shoulder, she climbed the boulders toward the last spot she remembered seeing the cougar cub before it disappeared. She approached slowly, hoping not to frighten it, but at the same time, hoping it wouldn't decide to attack her either. Despite its immaturity, it still looked big enough to do some serious damage if cornered. Lilly knew what she did now was immensely foolish, but she couldn't help it. She had a long love affair with the big cats, and always wanted to see one in the wild.

She positioned herself on top of a wide, flat boulder and tried desperately to quiet her rapid breathing so she could hear the faintest sounds of any movement in the immediate vicinity. One of the common golden eagles circled the sky above and screeched out a shrill, hollow cry. She dared not look at the magnificent bird right now. She had plenty of pictures of them already.

She swiveled her head and did a slow scan of the area. *Over there. Up higher ... a cave opening!* Crouched on the ledge of a rock overhang were two fat paws and the slitted, golden-brown eyes of a much bigger cat. The mother cougar.

Lilly froze. She heard a low, rumbling growl of warning, clearly intended for her. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled with instinctive reaction to that sound.

"It's okay," she whispered, both to herself and the snarling cougar. She reached for her camera, careful not to take her eyes off the cat and making every movement slow and as unthreatening as possible.

She positioned her camera, focused tight on the rock ledge and pressed down. Click. Nothing.

"Oh, shit, shit, shit!" she swore under her breath. She'd used all her film today while taking photos of trees, shrubbery, eagles and cloud formations. She would gladly exchange all of those much-needed reference photographs for one precious shot of the cougar.

The growl grew ominously louder. Lilly jammed the camera back into the bag and backed up, edging her body down the boulder, careful to give the mother cat her required space. She stepped on a smooth, round rock. Her boot slipped off

and her ankle twisted out from under her while she jerked around for balance. She slid the rest of the way down the hill on her hands and butt, tearing skin from her palms and ripping holes in her new jeans.

She landed at the bottom of the trail where she'd begun her climb. Loose rocks continued to tumble and pounce into her back from behind. Pain lanced in shooting waves up from her ankle and from her bleeding hands. Dirt and debris were already embedded in the cuts. She stood up awkwardly, shaking badly, and grimaced when she tried to wipe the dirt off her hands by rubbing them on her jeans. With one last backward glance in the direction of the cougar's cave, she limped painfully over to where Dancer waited by the tree.

Somehow, she'd found the strength to climb up into the saddle and ride the mare back to the ranch at a very slow pace. Two hours later, as sunset claimed the sky with its glowing orange and violet colors, Lilly guided Dancer into the paddock near the back of the barn. She ached all over her body.

Thankfully nobody was around to witness her injuries, either. She didn't want anyone to know about it. Past experience taught her that it was easier to hide them than to explain them. And in this case, she knew she'd been more stupid than any other time in her life. Crawling up a rocky mountain to catch a glimpse of a wild mother cougar and her cub was the most idiotic, senseless thing she had ever done.

*And it was worth it!*

She already formed a plan to go back up there tomorrow morning, armed with more film. Who knew how much longer



wild, big cats like these would be allowed to live free? It was an opportunity she wouldn't let go of.

Groaning in pain, Lilly slid off Dancer and leaned her face against the mare's flank for a moment. A wave of dizziness washed over her. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and waited for it to subside. The horse nickered.

"Just a minute, girl. Let me catch my breath and I'll put you in your stall with some oats. God knows, you deserve them."

Without warning, strong arms wrapped themselves around her shoulders and hips and lifted her off her feet. The scream died in her throat when Gabe's concerned, scowling face came into focus.

"Lilly." Her name sounded hoarse under his breath. "Oh God, sugar, what the hell happened?"

Pain lanced up from her ankle when it connected with the dangling stirrup. She squeezed her eyes shut and cried out. "Put me down. I'm okay."

"Like hell. You're hurt. Tell me what happened?"

"Nothing." She grimaced under a wave of fresh pain. "I twisted my ankle, that's all. Put me down, dammit."

He ignored her plea and carried her out of the paddock toward the house, his long strides eating up the distance to his truck. He jostled with her weight in his arms for a moment before opening the truck's passenger side door and gently set her down on the leather seat. "Stay here. I'll tell Marta and Carlo I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No! I don't need to go to the hospital." She tried to twist out of the seat and slip past him.

His large hands caught her around the waist. He gave her a little shake. "Listen to me, Lilly. You're cut up and bleeding and scared the shit out of me when I saw you slide off that horse like you had no bones left in your body. Now shut the hell up and do as I say!"

She must have had a bruised rib too, because the pressure of his hand shaking her caused her to gasp loudly.

"Christ!" He cradled her head against his chest, gently smoothing his hand over her tangled hair. "Lilly, I'm sorry. Please, sugar, let me help you. You need medical attention. How do I know you didn't break something?"

"Nothing broken," she panted. "Just a sprained ankle."

"Yeah, right," he mumbled with a harsh, tight expression on his face. He placed her legs back inside the cab and shut the door firmly, giving her a stern look that spoke volumes about the consequences if she chose to move again without his permission.

She sank back into the leather and groaned. Every muscle and bone in her body ached and pounded painfully inside her skull. He was back within a few short minutes, a worried Marta following behind him. Gabe climbed into the driver's seat while Marta peered inside.

"Oh, no! Look at you, pobrecita! What happened?"

"Nothing," Lilly smiled through her pain. "I slipped and twisted my ankle. That's all. But Mr. Macho Man here thinks I *must* go to the hospital."

Marta nodded vigorously. "Of course. Your hands, Senorita, you have cut them badly too. You must go. Gabe will take care of you."

"Yes, I will." Grim determination edged Gabe's firm mouth. He shut the door and started the truck.

Lilly sank further down the leather seat, seeking any comfortable position she could find to ease the pain that throbbed from various parts of her aching body. Finally she braced her good leg against the fender lump on the floor and closed her eyes.

Gabe cupped her chin. "Don't fall asleep."

She pulled her chin out of his gentle grasp. "I'm not going unconscious, if that's what you're worried about. It's my ankle, not my head."

"Well then, keep talking so I know you're okay while I drive."

Lilly stared out the window, uncomfortably aware of his scent filling the air inside the cab. She took a deep breath. *God, he always smelled so good.* Her chin tingled from his touch.

"When did you get back?" she sneaked a peek at him under the cover of her lowered lashes. He glanced at her briefly but she refused to meet his eyes.

"This morning. Tell me how you fell. Where were you?"

She turned her attention to her hands, biting her lip to keep from groaning aloud. Deep scrapes over her palms were crusted with dark, dried blood and sand. Two of her fingers were swollen and throbbed in tempo with each beat of her heart. At that moment, she didn't know what hurt more—her body, or her broken heart. Being near him, having his arms wrapped tight around her brought back all those raw feelings

she had last week right before he left to assist his fiancée with her tumultuous wedding plans.

"I rode up the southern trail. I was trying to take some photos when I slipped off the rock I was balancing on." There was no need for him to know about the cougars.

He listened, occasionally turning to watch her. She could feel his eyes touch her everywhere his hands couldn't. "Carlo tells me you've been doing that all week, going up there alone. Is it true?"

"Yes. I need to get as much view as possible. It's very beautiful. Everywhere I look, the landscape amazes me."

He was thoughtfully quiet for a long moment, his eyes darting between her and the road frequently. "It's too dangerous, Lilly. I can't let you do that anymore."

"What?" She finally had the courage to look at him. "It's my job, Gabe. You have no right to tell me what I can and can't do."

He ground his teeth together, the muscle bunching up and down in his jaw. "Oh, yes I can. And I'm making it my right."

Lilly was speechless. She opened her mouth to argue with him, but found no words to combat his determined macho attitude. Well, fine! She'd let him believe she was giving in, and then go about her business when he wasn't looking. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had to lie and deceive a man.

\* \* \* \*

Gabe drove around potholes as carefully as he could to avoid jarring Lilly while she slept. She leaned against his shoulder, her head falling forward into the protective,

cushioning crook of his arm. He had no intention of letting go of her either. She objected at first, when he settled her back in the truck for the ride home. But the mild sedative the ER doctor gave her soon broke through her resistance and he was pleased as punch to have her softness pressed close.

The ER physician, Dr. Olsen, was a no-nonsense older woman with a cap of salt-and-pepper hair and the habit of looking down her nose at everyone from behind a pair of half-rim glasses. She'd also given Lilly a prescription for antibiotics to ward off any infection from the cuts.

The shock of finding out that Lilly had no health insurance was like a splash of ice water in his face. He gladly paid her bills with the hospital and pharmacist, wondering how she managed to take care of herself at all.

Dr. Olsen's orders were very specific. Lilly must have a few days of bed rest and keep her weight off the ankle. And with her hands taped up, no doubt she'd be unable to do a lot of things for herself. The thought of her sudden, forced dependence on him made him smile. No way in hell was he letting Marta steal that pleasurable task from him either. Whatever Lilly needed, he'd be there to do it for her.

He ran his hand up and down her arm, relishing the softness of her warm skin. She murmured in her sleep and snuggled closer into his chest. *God almighty!* His cock stirred. This was not the time to be taking advantage of a helpless woman. He wanted her wide-awake and fully aware of everything he planned to do. Once she was healed enough, he planned to begin the delicate job of seducing her into his bed. Out of his bed. Everywhere.

While he drove and cuddled Lilly close, he played through the advice her psychiatrist, Dr. Morrison, had given him. The prickly woman had threatened to call the Feds on him once she learned he'd found out about Lilly's treatment with her. He stepped on sacred ground, breaking the patient-doctor privilege of total confidentiality. It was the first time in his life that he leaned on the power of his family name to get something normal people couldn't. Still, he had to do some fancy back stepping and finally managed to convince the doctor he meant Lilly no harm. Only pleasure—and possibly much more than that.

Dr. Morrison finally settled down when he acknowledged her refusal to discuss Lilly's actual treatment sessions, or what the bastard Craig had done to her psyche. She would only give him her clinical analysis. She agreed to the deal under three conditions. First, he had to make a sizable donation to the Free Women's clinic she operated. Second, he had to submit to grueling and embarrassing personality profiling. She wanted to know what made him tick from the inside out. And thirdly, she made him swear on his dead mother's grave that if any harm came to her client from Gabe, he'd take himself willingly to the penitentiary.

He'd spent two evenings with Dr. Morrison, both times at dinner in quiet restaurants where he paid the waiter to leave them alone once their meals had been served. Gabe wanted no interruptions during his precious, short time with Lilly's doctor.

*"She's not immune to the male form. In fact, she finds men very attractive. The best way to awaken her sexuality,*

*and make her realize her attraction to you, would be to simply make yourself available. Be there, at every turn. Don't push her. If she comes to you, of her own accord, she'll accept you. Let her make the first move. Let her take control. She's not a frigid woman, but she needs the safety of being the one in control. She's extremely independent, and very scared to trust a man not to hurt her again. You must earn her trust."*

Gabe forced the erection riding the zipper of his jeans into submission. He planned to earn her trust, starting right now. He'd make certain she felt safe, secure, and oh-so-eager for his touch.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lilly opened her eyes to daylight in her bedroom. Her injured ankle lay propped up on two extra pillows, the quilt draped across her knee. Her bandaged hands lay across her belly on top of the quilt. She swallowed, feeling an unusual dryness in her mouth and throat. Most likely it was an after-effect of the sedative the emergency room doctor had given her.

How had she gotten into bed a second time without remembering the details? *Damn him!* It had to have been Gabe again. She lifted the edge of the quilt with her tender, bandaged fingers and looked down at herself. She gasped. She was wearing her favorite gray cotton t-shirt. Had he undressed her? She looked around and saw no signs of the torn clothes she'd worn to the hospital. The attending nurse had to cut off her new cowboy boot to free her swollen ankle. Already she mourned that loss, they were brand new and more expensive than any other boot or shoe she'd ever bought for herself.

How did Gabe manage to take control of her life so easily? He just slid right in and manipulated her as if she were a puppet on a string.

She pulled the quilt off of her knee and tested her ankle by lifting it up off the pillow. She could wiggle her toes. The ankle still ached, but not nearly as fiercely as yesterday. Her hands felt good, just a little stiff, but her ribs, back and hips



were surprisingly sore. It felt like someone had beaten her with a baseball bat.

A soft knock sounded on her door. She thought about not answering, maybe he'd think she still slept and leave her alone.

"Go away." She winced at the weary sound of her own voice.

The door opened anyway. He edged it with his elbow and carried a tray over to her night stand.

"G'mornin', sugar. Hungry?"

She groaned and shut her eyes to the handsome spectacle he presented. Today he wore a plain white t-shirt and jeans that emphasized the power of his thighs when he walked. His biceps bulged and flexed with the tray he carried. She'd *never* given second thought to what clothes a man wore before, or how he moved. So, why did she notice every little thing about him?

That familiar warmth settled down between her thighs. It wasn't right. She couldn't allow herself to continue admiring his body. She openly glared at him as he approached and set the tray down before carefully sitting on the edge of her bed. He hiked up a jeans-clad knee and leaned his elbow on it. He stared at her.

"You undressed me last night, didn't you?"

At least he had the grace not to look smug or let his lips curve up in that sexy grin. "Yes. I couldn't very well let you sleep in those dirty, ripped clothes, now could I? Don't worry, I was a perfect gentleman and didn't take advantage of you. I prefer my woman be awake for that."

Heat rushed into her cheeks. Even her ears felt hot. "I'm not your woman, Gabe. Why are you still doing this? I thought your little trip to visit your fiancée would have reconfirmed your commitment to her."

It surprised her to catch a shuttered look cross his face, darkening his eyes with raw emotions before he turned his attention to the breakfast tray. "It's over between Amanda and me. Here, have some juice. You need to take your pill."

She struggled to push herself up against the pillows behind her head, wincing at the pain in her hands. "She broke up with you?"

"No. I broke off our engagement." He held out a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and a blue and yellow capsule.

She took the juice and the pill from his hand and obediently swallowed them both. "I'm sorry to hear it. That must have been hard on both of you."

Gabe's chuckle startled her. "Don't waste your sympathy on Amanda's broken heart, sugar. She never had one to break."

"And what about yours?"

He took her empty juice glass, obviously avoiding her question and reached for a slice of buttered wheat toast on the tray. "I'll survive. Open up."

She lifted a bandaged hand to take the toast from him.

"Uh-uh," he said, moving the toast out of her reach. "I'll feed you."

Lilly's heart raced with this new knowledge about his suddenly single status. "I can feed myself, you don't need to."

That sexy, come-hither grin returned to his mouth. "I want to. Now eat. That antibiotic is supposed to be taken with food."

She opened her mouth and he slipped a corner of buttered toast between her teeth. God, the way he watched her—so closely, so attentively. It unnerved her. The toast tasted like cardboard on her tongue while she chewed. He kept feeding her one bite at a time, flipping the toast from side to side so that she always had a corner to bite down. On the last bite, he let his thumb touch her bottom lip. Did she imagine it, or did he actually caress her lip with his thumb? That simple touch shot a tingle from her mouth, down her spine and straight down where it settled with an urgent throb between her legs. She forgot to chew and swallowed the toast in one dry lump. Her eyes watered from the effort.

Gabe reached for a plate piled high with scrambled ranchero eggs, sausage and crispy fried potatoes.

"Don't." She turned her face away from the fork he held up and stared out the window. "I'm not some dalliance to pass your available time with. And I don't date men on the rebound from a broken relationship. Especially not one so recent."

His sigh sounded loud in the room. He set the plate back down. "Is that from past experience?"

She shook her head and kept her attention focused on the brilliant blue sky outside. "I'm not going to be here that much longer. And I'm not interested in a short term relationship."

"Look at me." He said it softly, but the tone reflected the authority he commanded here on the ranch. Still she refused,

blinking past the wetness that clouded her vision. He reached up and traced a knuckle down her cheek. She shivered, unable to stop the pleasurable sensation. Then he cupped her chin and turned her face back to his.

"Listen to me now, Lilly. I never was in love with Amanda. Hell, I'm not even sure why I asked her to marry me, now that I look back at everything. I suppose I did it because it was expected of me. It's over and I'm grateful it didn't go any further than that. But I want you to know one thing—I'm not dallying with you. I'm very attracted to you, have been since the first night we met."

"Stop, I don't want to hear this!" She jerked her face out of his hand. "You don't mean it and I'm not falling for it."

"You tell me if you don't think I mean what I'm saying." He caught her hands and placed a tender kiss on each bandage. Then he locked her wrists together and pressed her fingers against his heart.

The rapid, thunderous beat inside his chest was unmistakable, as if he'd just completed a marathon. Her chin quivered under the need she felt flowing from him.

"That doesn't mean anything," she said stubbornly. "It says that you're healthy and have a strong heartbeat."

His smile turned wolfish. "I am," he agreed readily. "But it only speeds up and pumps like a wild animal whenever you're around. All I have to do is think about you, and it sets my heart a-racin'."

She pulled her hands out from his grasp. "Well, then you should learn better control. It still doesn't prove anything."

Gabe leaned forward with both his arms braced on either side of her shoulders. She pressed her head back into the pillows, her eyes flitted between the dusky look in his and the firm, tempting line of his lips.

"You make me lose control, sweet Lilly. But I want you to feel the same way. I won't force myself on you. Ever. I want you to know that. If you ever say no, it means no. I respect a woman's right to say no."

He dropped his head, stopping a hair's breath away from joining his lips to hers. She whimpered—from need or fear, she couldn't tell which any more. He overwhelmed her senses with his openly sexual advances. She licked her lips, half anticipating the blissful, searing heat of his mouth again.

"Are you saying no? Do you feel the fire between us? Or are you afraid of what our bodies do to each other when we touch?"

Lilly's breath hitched in her throat. His smoky gaze burned into her soul. "Yes."

He dropped lower, barely skimming his mouth across hers. "Yes, you're afraid? Or no, you don't want me to kiss you now?"

She closed her eyes, not able to stand the torture of his almost-but-not-quite touch. The incredible need he stirred inside her made her want to scream in frustration. He leaned his chest down, crushing her breasts against his hard upper body. God, her nipples ached from the delicious pressure. Moisture pooled and soaked the crotch of her panties. She thought she could smell the musky perfume of her own arousal seeping up from under the quilt.

Sure enough, she heard him take a deep breath. His nostrils flared and his eyes darkened to black. "Tell me, sugar. Tell me no, or tell me yes. The choice is yours to make."

Should she have a fling with him for a few weeks? And then pick up her things and leave, never to see him again? No. She had to cut it off right here before it went too far. The last thing she needed was a broken heart of her own. Not so soon after finally thinking she had put her ragged, bitter past behind her.

With every ounce of willpower she had, she forced her lips out from under his and turned her cheek into the pillow. "No. I can't do this."

He vibrated with tension for a moment, apparently struggling for that control over his obvious desire. She knew she hurt him with her denial, and it wasn't easy when her own traitorous body clamored and yearned to join with his in the most intimate way. Her pussy clenched painfully.

"Alright. For now." He pushed off the bed and turned his back on her, dragging both hands through his thick hair with a heavy, frustrated groan.

Her own smoldering passions begged her to reach out and bring him back to her bed. Instinctively, she knew he'd be a gentle lover, at first. It had been a very long time since she'd felt a man penetrate the folds of her core, filling her with his thick, hard cock. And she knew Gabe wouldn't pull out to climax. No, he'd claim her body until he was satisfied.

She dragged her eyes from admiring the way his muscles played under that t-shirt while he raked through his hair.

Instead, she focused on a loose bit of tape on her left hand. She plucked at it, nervously wondering if he'd be viciously angry with her now and say some damned hateful things too.

"Lilly, don't pull off your bandages yet. I'll do that. They're supposed to be changed every twenty-four hours."

She stopped what she was doing and tucked her hands under the quilt. She wanted to hide from him. He saw things inside her that she wasn't ready for any man to see. Certainly she would know if and when she was ready to give herself to a man again, right? What would the signs of that readiness be?

Not having the answers was much worse than asking herself the questions. Would it be as Dr. Morrison said, when she was willing to let go and trust a man to make love to her?

"Finish your breakfast. I'll be back before lunchtime. But don't let me find out you got up from that bed and put any weight on your ankle. You need to be able to walk at the rodeo. And you're gonna dance with me at the Cattleman's Ball."

He spun on the heel of his boot and closed the door behind him with a sharp snap. Oh yeah, he was pissed at what she'd done to him. But he didn't lash out at her with verbal or physical threats.

A small grin tugged at her lips. Her heart did a little flip-flop remembering the intimate way he held her from their last dance. She would certainly look forward to that—now that she knew he wasn't just trying to screw her while he was engaged to another woman.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

By the third day, Gabe was ready to tie Lilly to her bed. Not that the idea didn't appeal to him in other, more enjoyable ways.

He carried both their lunches upstairs, thoroughly planning to enjoy another private meal with her. She had a delightful, quick wit and sense of humor when he wasn't trying to re-awaken her sexuality. Then she clammed up and avoided him. He knocked once, and then opened the door with a greeting poised on his tongue. Only, she wasn't in bed where he expected her to be—resting that damned sprained ankle.

"Dammit, Lilly." He set the tray down on her night stand, stormed across the room to the adjoining door where she'd set up her studio and yanked it open.

She sat on the floor with her sore ankle stretched out in front of her and her other leg curled up like a pretzel over her thigh. One arm reached toward the ceiling. A slinky little midriff t-shirt in a juicy watermelon color emphasized the pinkness of her lips and the luscious, round swell of her breasts. Stretchy black shorts hugged her hips and thighs tighter than a coat of paint. The sun from the window flooded the space she occupied, making her look like a fallen, golden angel. She dropped her arm at the sound of the door slamming open.

"What are you doing?" He stopped and glowered at her. "Did you fall down?"



Her giggle sounded like music to his ears. "No. I'm trying to do my yoga. It helps to get the kinks and sore spots out of my back."

He snagged a chair, pulled it around and straddled it. "The doctor said you had bruising to your back and hips and to expect some soreness. Can I help take that pain away?"

She squinted in the bright sunlight. "With what, more pills? No thanks. Stretching helps a little."

"No pills, I promise. Just these." He held up his hands, palms facing her.

Her beautiful blue eyes clouded up again. She bit that juicy bottom lip. "Are you a massage therapist, pretending to be a cowboy?"

It was time to give her another piece of his life to consider. "I used to give my mother massages, to ease the pain from her cancer. After the morphine wore off, a massage was the only thing that helped make her more comfortable."

She mouthed the word 'oh'. "I ... I'm sorry. I didn't know that was what she died from. It sounds so horrible."

"It was, but she never complained. She taught me and my sister to take risks in our lives ... if it meant we'd find what we wanted more than anything else."

He watched her uncurl her long, shapely leg and stretch it out. "You have everything. What could you possibly want?"

"True. But material things are fleeting and impersonal. What's the most important thing you own, something you value above everything else?"

Lilly looked around for a moment before answering. "My camera, I value that. And my real sable brushes, I can't work

without them. And for a few short days I really liked my new cowboy boots until the nurse cut them off!"

"All of those things can be replaced, Lilly. Life can't."

She snickered. "Easy for you to say."

"They can't give you the love of another person, can they? Someone to share your life with. Honestly, openly, totally."

She turned her hands over and studied the criss-crossing tape that held antibiotic ointment and gauze over the few remaining cuts. Then she tipped her head sideways to glance up at him.

"Wow. You really know how to drop a bomb on a girl. Are you looking for love, Gabe? The kind your mother told you about?"

He made sure to keep all emotion from his face, and to hold her gaze as long as possible before she squirmed uncomfortably in the taut silence between them. She needed to know how serious he really was.

"I won't lie to you," he finally said. "Yes. I am. Aren't you?"

A deep frown creased her smooth brow. "No. I'm not sure I know how to love someone in that way. I wasn't raised in a very loving household. My parents hated each other."

"That must have been hard. Does that mean you can't try?"

The little chuckle and shake of her head told him she didn't understand. She peered up again from between sun-gilded lashes, her eyes sparkling like polished sapphires. He thought his heart would break at the sheer beauty she presented, sitting on the floor in that tiny outfit that hugged every

delicious curve of her body. He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and hold her tight for a long, long time.

"That's just it, Gabe. I'm not sure I *should* try. I failed once already. I can't do that again. You know the words to the song, 'the first cut is the deepest'." She sat up a little straighter and winced.

He scooted his chair closer. "Turn around."

For a split second he thought she'd argue and hedge her way out of doing as he asked. *Patience. She doesn't trust you yet.*

"Trust me, Lilly. I only want to help you to feel better, heal faster."

To his absolute surprise and delight, she swiveled on her butt cheeks and turned her back toward him.

"Any one spot in particular that hurts most?" He placed his fingers across the tops of her silky shoulders and began kneading the small muscle there with a feather light touch.

"Right in the middle," she mumbled. She dropped her head forward, letting her hair fall into her face and exposed the soft, delicate skin at the base of her neck. The slinky top she wore curved low across her back.

Damn! She wasn't wearing a bra. He steeled himself against the rush of blood that pumped into his cock. Even the thought of having her full, soft breasts in his hands made him hard. If he turned this therapeutic massage into anything more than comfort for her, he'd lose the small bit of trust she'd given him. Besides, she hurt. Knowing that, seeing the pain when she moved, made him ache to soothe her.

He rolled his thumbs in small circles, each time pressing a little harder down the sides of her slender spine. Lilly moaned. He'd found the right spot, and the right pressure to apply on that damaged tissue. He focused the healing warmth into his hands, alternating pressure with long, smoothing strokes.

"Oh," she moaned a bit louder. "That feels so good. You really do have the magic touch. Are you sure you're not really a massage therapist, hiding behind a pair of cowboy boots and a Stetson?"

God, she made him smile more often than anyone else on Earth. "No, just a cowboy who spent two years in Japan as an exchange student. I learned healing massage from my Sensi, my master, while I was there. At the time, I didn't think it would ever be applicable. When my mom got sick, I realized how valuable his training was then."

"Mmm ... so that's where you learned Kata."

His simple smile spread quickly to a wicked, knowing grin. He knew she watched him perform his ritual training exercises every morning on the pier. He worked hard to stay in shape and was proud of his body. Marta had a few choice words for him when he refused to wear a swimsuit while Lilly lived inside the house. It was all part of Lilly's desensitization. He wanted her to be completely comfortable—and knowledgeable—of his large size. The handful of women that he'd actually fucked in his lifetime, had all exclaimed how much larger his cock was than average. He simply accepted it as fact.

"Yes. Kata helps me to find my center of balance, besides being a great form of exercise for the mind, body, and soul. It teaches control and how to focus the power and energy inside the body to execute the most damage to your opponent, or to give the most pleasure to your partner."

Her head came up slowly and he knew she clearly understood his last words. They were meant for her. He continued to rub and manipulate the slender curvy muscles of her spine, waiting for her to speak.

She swallowed, loud enough for him to hear it. "And how does it teach you to do that?"

"Through knowledge of the most sensitive parts of a woman's body—which aren't always what most men consider the obvious ones."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes." He flattened his fingers on her back and stroked his palms up and down and across her shoulders. She was very loose and relaxed now. It pleased him when she leaned into the pressure of his hands.

"What else?"

"Much more," he continued in the same, slow voice. "It teaches me how to interpret the intensity of pleasure, or pain, flowing through her skin, her muscles, her flesh and blood. Knowing how much is enough, or not enough, or too much can mean the difference between simply fucking for one's own satisfaction—and the ability to prolong the pleasure experienced by both, and bring your partner to multiple, mutually enjoyable orgasms."

She stifled a moan, this one obviously not from his massage. He rested his hands on the tops of her shoulders.

"How does your back feel now? Better?"

Lilly turned around to face him, scooting up on her hands and knees. Her smooth cheeks were flushed with warm color, her lips full and moist. The smoky-blue intensity in her eyes surprised him. "Yes, thank you. You're great with your hands."

He swallowed a chuckle and struggled to keep a straight face. "Any time, sugar. Any time. All you have to do is ask."

She leaned forward on her hands and instantly created a deep, creamy velvet crevice when her breasts squeezed together. The twin nubs of her erect nipples pointed out at him, looking like delectable little berries in that tight top. God, he wanted to wrap his tongue around one and suck that firm, hot flesh into his mouth. His semi-erect cock surged against the zipper in his jeans. He spread his legs wider apart to ease the delicious torture.

"Gabe," she barely whispered his name. "I want to even our score. It's something I thought about doing for a while now, if you'll let me."

"What score? I didn't realize you were indebted to me."

He had to force himself to remain absolutely still, and look totally relaxed while trying to control the fierce throbbing and pulsing of his body. His heart hammered inside his chest. Did she know what she did to him? Did she really mean what she was trying to say?

She lifted one hand and lightly ran her fingertips up from his knee to the top of his thigh, rising up between his legs

until she kneeled before him. A trail of fire burned across the path she followed and seared his skin beneath the material of his jeans. But then she lost the nerve to continue and sank back down.

"What is it?" he reached out and caught her retreating hand, lacing his fingers with hers and keeping it on his knee. "You can tell me."

Her eyes flew to their joined hands. "You gave me something that night, when we first met. Something I really enjoyed, and never had before." Suddenly her breath exploded across his chest. "Geez, this is so embarrassing!" She started to pull away from him again. He reached out and caught her shoulders.

"Lilly. Don't. There was nothing wrong with what I did to you, or what you felt that night. You're a grown woman. I'm glad you enjoyed it. But I'm not expecting anything in the form of payback, even though I said that. I was being an idiot, stupid and spiteful. I never expected to ever see you again, and suddenly, there you were. Just like I remembered you."

She nodded, her dark pink lips quivering with a tremulous smile. She put her hands on his thighs and pushed herself a little closer into his crotch. "Thank you for being so understanding. There's a lot I could tell you, but I don't think I'm ready for that yet. I do want to give you something in return, though. To clear the board, so to speak. If you'll let me?"

It took every ounce of control he ever mastered not to crush her against his chest and carry her off to the bed. No,

she had to do this on her own. And he was more than willing to let her torture him some more to get her to that point. He sensed she was very close to taking that first step and he would do nothing to hinder or stop her.

"What do you want to do?"

"I, um..." she licked her lips and then pressed them together, her eyes lowered to the obvious bulge in his jeans. "I want to touch you, Gabe. I want to learn how to give you back that pleasure. Is that okay?"

"Only if it's really what *you* want, Lilly. Don't do it for me. It has to feel good to you, too."

He leaned back against the chair, giving her some space and the freedom to do whatever it was she wanted to do. When her fingers grazed the top button of his jeans and popped it open, his stomach muscles jerked to attention. He sucked in a tight breath. Thank God he wasn't wearing a belt today! His cock raged and bucked for freedom, more than eager for the promise of her touch as she worked his zipper down with painful slowness.

She parted the fabric of his fly and released his raging hard-on. A look of sheer wonder filled her face. He felt himself swell even more now that it was free of the confining jeans. She hesitated, chewing her bottom lip. For a heart wrenching second he thought she was scared. Then, with a soft touch, she gathered the edge of his t-shirt and rolled it up his stomach, out of her way, running her fingertips back down the ridges of his abs.



"Lilly. Are you sure this is what you want?" He braced his hands on the sides of the chair, determined to keep them there rather than gather her up and scare her off.

"Yes," she whispered. "I want to. You'll tell me if I do something wrong, won't you?"

She wrapped cool fingers around the base of his throbbing cock and squeezed experimentally, looking up to see his reaction. *Sweet Jesus!* She was going to kill him with those soft, curious, innocent looks—piece by piece, tear him apart from the inside out. His Sensi master hadn't prepared him for this kind of torture.

He had to clear his throat to speak. "I like what you're doing. Don't stop yet."

Beyond his wildest wet dreams, he never thought he'd feel the hot sweetness of her mouth on his cock. His words emboldened her. She licked the tip of his broad head, delicately tasting the clear bubble on the tip, like a butterfly dipping into a pool of nectar.

She kept looking up at him, trying to judge the reaction on his face. His balls were still trapped inside his jeans and the ache inside them burned to the point of pain. He tried to control his breathing, but finally lost that war. His breath flew out of his lungs.

A little smile played on her lips. She dipped down on him in earnest and licked her hot little tongue all the way around his cock head, then wrapped her lips around him and took him into her mouth. He had to close his eyes to the flood of sweet ecstasy.

"Oh damn. Lilly."

She groaned, her lips stretched wide over his long, thick shaft. Her tongue flicked up and down the ridge, around the swell of his cock head, stroking up a fire of incredible intensity in his blood. His hips jerked up on their own, pushing his cock deeper into her mouth. Eagerly, she sucked him in to the back of her throat, caressing her tongue over and around every long inch she could reach. Her fingernails dug into his pubic hair, sending thrills of pleasure-pain across his loins.

"Lilly, sugar, I'm gonna come ... real soon. If you don't want me to do that in your mouth, now's the time to pull off."

She dragged her lips up his shaft, scraping him with her teeth all the way to the pulsing head. He gritted his jaw tight to keep from growling out the thrill she gave him going up the length of his cock. She released his head with a little sucking sound, and kissed it. Then she turned her face back up to his. She was breathing hard and fast, her face flushed, her eyes dark and glossy. Her lips looked bruised and so damn luscious.

"Don't you want me to?"

He couldn't help it. He reached out and cupped the back of her head, tangling his fingers roughly into her silky hair. He drew her up to his mouth for a quick, hard kiss. God, he could taste himself on her mouth, salty mixed with her sweet. He thrust his tongue inside and mimicked the pumping action he wanted to do with his cock.

"I do want it," he breathed against her lips. "Very much."

She kissed his lips once more and then his chin, down to his chest, navel and finally swallowed his cock again. The heat of her tongue seared him. He thrust his hips up, deeper into

her hot mouth. To his amazement, she slipped her fingers into his jeans and released his aching balls.

That did it. He came with such force, an explosion of semen jetted into her throat. She continued to suckle and swallow, hungrily lapping up everything he gave her.

When she finally let go of him, she moved away and pressed the back of one hand against her mouth. He gasped for breath. She stood up and limp-walked over to the window. He watched her carefully. She was withdrawing again, pulling her emotions tight inside herself. He stuffed his still-erect cock back inside his jeans and zipped it. Carefully.

"You enjoyed that?" She stood at the window, her voice tight and edgy once again.

Gabe pushed the chair aside and went to her, standing so close he could smell the sunny warmth of her hair, aching to wrap her in the safe cocoon of his arms. Instinctively he sensed she'd struggle against him now. Whatever demon she was fighting, she would resist and fight him just as hard.

She needed space.

"Hell yes," he whispered into her ear. "What you just did goes above and beyond anything I've ever felt. I think I'm indebted to you again."

"No, Gabe. We're even. Now please go. I have work to do and I'd appreciate it if you'd leave me alone from now on."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lilly peered out the kitchen windows as Gabe, Carlo and several cowboys rode out toward the road between pastures, a large herd of steers in front of them. She moved back to the table when Marta slid a ham and potato omelet onto her plate. She could plan her day according to what she saw outside. Since Gabe hadn't left her alone for five days, this would be her first opportunity to sneak down to the barn and saddle up Dancer.

"Where are they going?"

Marta poured coffee into two mugs and brought them to the table. "I think that's the first herd going to the stockyards. They load up from the road where the trucks have easy access."

"Oh." The steers were headed for slaughter, to become dinner. "How long will they be gone?"

"The steers?" Marta chuckled.

"Ha ha, Marta. Very funny. No, I mean the men. Will it take them all day?"

"Most of the day." Marta glanced up at her with soft, dark eyes. "You miss him?"

Lilly sputtered into her coffee. "Who?"

"Gabe. He has been spending a lot of time with you since you were hurt last week, keeping you company, yes?"

"Ah, yes. He's a very annoying, persistent man." That was all Lilly wanted to say. She resisted the urge to squirm in her chair under Marta's seemingly innocent question. Anyone

could have walked in on them while she was swallowing Gabe's magnificent cock. She hadn't even locked the door!

"He is a very kind man, very considerate and concerned about the people he loves."

Lilly set her coffee mug down with careful precision. "I'm sure he is. You've known him a long time. But he doesn't love me. He's just on the rebound from his broken engagement to Amanda. She broke his heart, I'm sure of it."

"I'm not so sure." Marta scraped a glob of raspberry jelly across a slice of toast. "He hasn't smiled so much since before his dear Mama passed away, not even when he was first engaged to Amanda. You are good for him, *Senorita*. Even my Carlo says it is so."

She sighed. "Put your match-making wand away, Marta. I'm simply another girl, who happens to be close by. When they break up, men fall into two categories: those who completely avoid all women, and those who fall immediately for the next one. I think Gabe's in the latter half. And that's all there is to it."

Marta silently ate her breakfast for several minutes. But as Lilly expected, she couldn't stay quiet for long.

"So, you have changed your mind about coming with us to the rodeo, yes?"

"Sure." Lilly was grateful for the change in subject. "With all the excited buzz it might be fun to see. I plan to take my camera and try to capture the rodeo spirit for a painting. Western art is a really hot seller on the East coast markets. Who knows, I might come up with a series."

"Will you stay for the Cattleman's Ball?"

Lilly couldn't help a troubled frown from tightening her forehead. "Not after hearing about the dress code. I don't think that's a good idea now, since I have nothing fancy enough to wear. Buying a pretty gown that I'll never wear again is not something I can afford."

"But I..."

Lilly shook her head to still Marta's next words. "And don't tell me again how much you'd love to buy one for me. I can't accept that, Marta. I appreciate it, really. But I'm not comfortable with that."

"You are being very stubborn." Marta sniffed. "I never had a daughter, you could at least let me pretend. I so enjoyed spoiling Megan, but now she's married."

Lilly reached over the table and gently clasped her hand over Marta's. The woman's generous soul and maternal instincts were strong and vibrant. She would have made a terrific mother.

"Thank you, Marta. I appreciate it, really. Call it my stubborn pride if you wish, but I've always paid my own way when I can. I feel horribly guilty whenever I borrow anything from anyone. I have to do things my way. Its bad enough that I still have to find out how much to pay Gabe back for my emergency room visit and those awful pills he made me take everyday."

"He will never accept your money."

Lilly considered this for a moment, chewing on buttered toast. "Well, then I'll find another way to pay him back. But I won't be indebted to anyone."

"Have it your way, Senorita. You told Gabe already, that you aren't coming to the dance?"

"Not yet. I will, soon enough. Besides, I'm sure there are lots of girls waiting to dance with him and all the other Evening Star cowboys. He won't even notice I'm not there."

Marta stabbed her omelet and mumbled something in quiet, rapid Spanish, which sounded like combinations of swear words and prayer.

Lilly giggled. "Whatever you just said, Marta, I'm so glad I only took one year of Spanish. I think my ears should be burning."

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell does he expect from me, anyway?"

Lilly admired the passing scenery of thick aspens and tall pines while Dancer's sure-footed steps climbed up a new trail. She talked to the mare as if the horse understood every word, not caring in the least that she never answered.

"I can't give him what he wants. Am I attracted to him? Oh, hell yes. In the worst possible way. But he wants a wife. And I'm not marriage material, Dancer."

Her one-way conversation was another form of self-healing prescribed by Dr. Morrison. It was easier to talk to the horse instead of the mirror the good doctor administered.

She needed the freedom of the outdoors again. Inside the house, Gabe was a constant presence, a shadow in the corner of her eye and in her thoughts, relentlessly reminding her of the taste and feel of him inside her mouth.

*God, he tasted even better than he smelled.*

He accepted the cold shoulder she'd given him afterwards with a careful sort of distance. The gold flecks had burned brighter in his hazel-green eyes, hinting at some deeper emotion he kept carefully hidden. Whatever it was, she didn't want to know.

Sucking him to orgasm was a simple thing to do for him, like the expert massage he'd given her to loosen her sore muscles. Except that she couldn't forget the feel of his cock surging past her lips, stretching her mouth and filling her up to the back of her throat. The skin of his penis was like hot satin against her tongue, the taste of his semen like salty melted butter.

*God, he'd been delicious in her mouth.*

And the memory of that 'simple thing' tortured her every night, lying in bed with a restless urgency that plowed through her womb. Her pussy clenched with empty yearning, while she tossed and turned seeking sleep. It was impossible not to think of his impressive size and wonder, wanting to explore more of his gorgeous body with her fingertips, with her tongue, with every inch of her own skin.

Several times she fantasized about slipping out of bed and taking the few short steps to his bedroom. He left the door cracked open, apparently not concerned about his own privacy. What would he do if she suddenly showed up at his bedside in the middle of the night?

*Can I trust him? Should I try?*

Surprisingly, the more she thought about it, the more she realized he hadn't forced himself on her. He stopped when she asked him to. She understood now, she had the right to



say no. Gabe was an honorable man, and he was honor bound to a woman's desire and decision.

*He does have control over himself. I know he wouldn't lose it if I lost my nerve.*

She never had to look too far to find him watching her with that sexy half-smile. Gabe was easy to be with and didn't always need to talk. If she sat in the living room at night to sketch, he'd wander in with a newspaper and read it quietly. If she went upstairs to her studio, he'd come up with a snack, to share a glass of wine, or just to chat about the progress on her painting.

Clearly, he admired it. She could tell by the way his eyes wandered over the images, watching while it progressed from a simple pencil outline to being filled-in and brought to life with color and texture. His father would be pleased to learn how much Gabe already enjoyed the painting. It was nearly complete; she needed to finish gathering details for the last angle.

"I'm leaving in a couple weeks, Dancer. Back to New York. Maybe to New Mexico later. I can't get emotionally involved with Gabe. Not that this ranch isn't to die for, you know? The scenery around here could keep me busy for years and I haven't even made it into the interior yet."

She reined the mare over to an outcropping of rocks that framed a ledge above the high valley, overlooking the ranch house below. This was the highest point she'd been to yet. Granite Peak framed the background behind the valley, boldly spearing twelve thousand five hundred feet into a sky so blue

and vibrant, she doubted she'd ever be able to capture that exact shade with paint.

Drawing a deep breath of clean, pine-infused air, Lilly dismounted and tied Dancer to a group of trees in the shade. Her sneakers made crunchy noise on the rocks strewn everywhere like copper and bronze gravel. Thankfully her ankle no longer throbbed when she put pressure on it. She withdrew her camera from the saddlebags and began capturing the house and valley from this vantage point.

Once she finished a roll of film, she set out her watercolor pad and made a few quick studies of color. The leaves of the aspen surrounding the lake had a gold tone now. She would have to hurry to finish her painting before they changed completely. A fresh mountain breeze swept behind her and continued down to the valley. She shivered. The air was considerably cooler up here. Despite the sun, goose bumps prickled her arms beneath a long-sleeved fleece jacket.

Thankfully, she wouldn't be staying here until the snow fell. She'd brought none of her winter coats. Being considered a tight ass with money wasn't something she was proud of, but she'd learned from experience that superfluous spending got her into trouble. The bare necessities mattered most and she could live without the rest.

That damned Cattleman's Ball posed a problem for her. Gabe expected her to dance with him then.

*Oh, just admit it. You want that too.*

But after listening to Marta's delight with the fancy dresses and jewelry worn by the women, who all tried to out-do each

other every year, Lilly knew it wasn't something she'd enjoy now.

Men had it so easy. All they had to do was put on a tux and be done with it. Would anyone notice if she showed up in a pair of jeans, a sweater and sneakers? It would be almost as embarrassing as her High School prom. Her date with cute Mark Sanders had ended before it even began, after seeing the disappointment on his face when she came downstairs wearing her best Sunday dress. All because her parents couldn't afford to buy her a real prom dress. The humiliation was still strong enough to make her eyes sting with unforgotten tears.

*Enough! You're not a little girl anymore.*

She packed up her things and walked back to Dancer and untied her from the tree.

"Come on, girl. If we hurry, I can sneak you back into your stall before Gabe and the others get back. What he doesn't know won't hurt him, right?"

\* \* \* \*

She hadn't been quick enough.

Quite a few cowboys lingered around the paddock when she and Dancer trotted up to the barn. A loud, rhythmic metal pounding rang from inside. Six of Gabe's horses stood quietly dozing in the afternoon sun, gathered in a small corral. There was no sign of him anywhere. She recognized the four cowboys who straddled the top rail of the corral as Vernon, the brothers Hank and Joe, and Matt. Hank vaulted off the rail

before the other three could do so and rushed to hold Dancer's reins for her dismount.

Lilly dropped from the saddle. "Thanks, Hank. What's going on with all the noise?"

Hank's longish, sandy brown hair ruffled in the breeze. "Uh," he muttered, looking into the barn. "Boss's been looking for this mare. He's shoeing horses now. I'll take her in for ya', since he's a mite crabby."

"Why is he crabby?"

He grinned at her, peeking up with shy interest from soft gray eyes. "Guess he wasn't expect'n you and her to be gone off on your own again. Get's a thorn under his hide when his orders aren't followed."

"His orders? Oh, I see. Don't worry about it Hank, I'll take Dancer in for her shoeing."

Lilly slid the reins out of Hank's weather-beaten hands and gave him a sweet smile. She led Dancer into the barn, nodded 'hello' to the other cowboys when they stepped aside for her to pass. She enjoyed the way they tipped their hats. They were all such gentleman! Obvious male awareness being what it was, at least they had manners.

Warrior stood quietly between two cross-ties at the far end of the long aisle inside the barn, idly twitching his long white tail from side to side. One big hoof was planted on Gabe's muscular thigh. And Gabe wasn't wearing a shirt. Bent over at the waist, sweat glistened on the muscles that played across his shoulders and broad back. He ignored her and hammered nails into Warrior's new shoe with enough force to make her

wonder why his horse didn't reach over and bite him in the ass.

Lilly stopped at Dancer's stall, tied the mare and began unbuckling her saddle. She kept an eye on Gabe, but he still had yet to acknowledge her. The stony silence and set of his jaw were clear enough indicators that he was plenty pissed. She wasn't trying to be quiet and hide from him.

She smiled at Connor, the barn boy who cleaned the stalls each day. Connor glanced quickly at Gabe and shook his head at her, silently warning her of Gabe's apparent temper. She shrugged and reached for a brush to rub the sweat out of Dancer's glossy, spotted coat.

*Did everyone have to tip toe around him when he was in a bad mood?*

Well, she wouldn't. She finished grooming Dancer and wondered if she should put her in her stall, or wait for Gabe to finish with Warrior.

Sunlight streamed in from the open barn doors, casting both Gabe and Warrior in stark, golden relief. Dust motes and small bits of straw swirled and danced around them, softening the harsh light around the man and horse. The picture sealed itself in her mind.

Inspiration struck at the oddest times. Lilly rushed to grab her camera from the saddlebag, hoping to capture this moment on film for a painting idea later. She left Dancer at her stall and focused on Gabe and Warrior standing in a swath of dusty sunlight.

*God, the horse was plenty beautiful ... but the man was fuckin' gorgeous! What a model he made for a painting.*

She snapped a whole roll of film on them. Without being told, quiet Connor stepped forward to take the stallion back to his stall. She let them pass before approaching Gabe.

"Hank tells me you want to shoe Dancer too. Shall I bring her up now?"

He straightened from putting a hammer back into his horseshoeing toolbox. The heat from his temper practically seared her. His jeans hung low across his lean hips and she forced herself not to look down at the fine hairs around his belly button. She knew the crisp feeling of those hairs against her nose and lips only too well.

He stepped toward her, hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. Powerful chest muscles flexed each time he opened and closed his hands. Was he trying to scare her with this madder-than-hell male attitude? Lilly took a deep breath to keep from backing away, and lifted her chin into the heat of his glare.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Where'd you go today, sugar?"

Gabe's voice sounded deceptively sweet. His breath whispered over her face. Lilly knew better, judging by the heat in his eyes and the muscle that twitched in his jaw. Up, down, up, down ... as if it had a life of its own.

"Where my work takes me, since that *is* what I'm here for."

A dimple formed in one tanned cheek. He was standing so close she could smell the musk of his sweat mixed with leather, hay and horses. It was the most masculine aroma she'd ever experienced. Bold, honest, not at all unpleasant.

"Thought I told you not to venture out on the high trails without me. Seems one accident wasn't enough to teach you a lesson."

She struggled to keep her eyes focused on his, away from the tempting expanse of his chest and those flat, brown nipples she wanted to tweak between her teeth.

"You thought wrong. I don't need or want an escort while I'm working. And I don't need your permission either. I'm not one of your cowboys. Technically, I work for your father. Do you think he'd tell me not to do the work he hired me for?"

His hand snaked out so fast she didn't see it. She only felt the steely grasp around her wrist a split-second before he hauled her against his chest. His other hand moved up to graze her cheek, the touch surprising in its feathery softness

compared to the grip he had on her wrist. She almost dropped her camera, forgotten in her free hand.

"I'm responsible for everyone on this ranch and that includes you. Now, if you can't follow orders, I'll have to take away your horse and you can go back to walkin', if you'd prefer that?"

She glared up at him and thumped his chest with her camera. "What a contradiction you are! First you tell Carlo I have to ride the horse to do my job here on the ranch. Now you're telling me I can't ride to finish it? You're not making one spit of sense, Gabe."

"Damn, sugar." He cocked an eyebrow. "Nobody's tried my patience before the way you do. I'm about ready to put you over my knee and spank that pretty little ass of yours."

Lilly felt her mouth open in shock. She closed it with an audible snap of her teeth, determined not to let him know how arousing that thought was. She should be afraid of him. Why on Earth wasn't she now? The truth of it hit her like a splash of ice water.

*It's because you trust him. You know he wants you, but he won't do anything you don't want him to do.*

She tugged on her wrist. He let it slide out of his grip with slow precision, not too fast. She took a step back, adding some breathing room between them. "You wouldn't dare lay a hand on me. There are at least twelve cowboys outside who would run to my rescue if I scream."

"I'd like to lay a lot more than my hands on you, Lilly. And my men know better than to interrupt me when I'm busy with my woman."



"Your wo ... What! I don't know when or where you got the idea, but I'm *not* your woman." She poked her finger into his firm breastbone for emphasis. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get some film developed in town. I have work to do."

Lilly spun on the heel of her sneaker and headed back down the barn aisle.

"Do you like Chinese?"

His voice called out before she even reached the saddlebags with her things in them. She turned around and gave him a quizzical look. Her blood thrummed so loudly inside her body and through her eardrums she wasn't sure she understood what he said.

"Chinese what?"

Gabe planted his hands on his lean hips and shook his head. "Food, Lilly. Do you like Chinese food?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Would you like to have dinner with me in town tonight? We have a great little Chinese restaurant. Marta and Carlo are out to the fairgrounds for two days setting up our stalls and box seats for the rodeo. They're staying at the hotel."

"Oh." In other words, they were spending some 'quality time' with each other. She flipped open the saddlebags and stuffed the camera inside. "Are you ... asking me out on a date?"

His eyes glittered in the half-light of the barn. "I am. We can drop off your film at Murphy's One-Hour and have it developed while we eat, if you'd like."

"Okay. Yes, that would be nice. But, do they have anything on the menu that's not beef related? I'm dying for some chicken or fish."

Gabe wiped his hand across his mouth to hide his chuckle, not being very successful at it. "Yeah, I thought you might be. They do. Be ready at six, sugar."

"Six." She gave him a quick smile and ducked her head, focusing on the saddlebags at her feet so he wouldn't notice how infused with sudden shyness she'd become.

A *real* date with Gabe? That appealed to her in some odd, silly young girl way. The idea made her giddy and nervous all over again. A real date had certain *implications*—and she'd just agreed to them. With him. All that needed to be worked out was how far she'd let those implications take her.

\* \* \* \*

Lilly showered and shaved her underarms and legs in record time. With a towel wrapped around her hair and another around her body, she set about the task of deciding what in her meager closet would be right for a date with him. Fortunately, she'd bought a new skirt when she went shopping with Marta. It was soft, stone-washed denim and a little flirty due to the low-rise waist that exposed her navel. The skirt was also much shorter than what she was used to wearing, but it had been on sale. It looked really pretty on the store mannequin paired with a lacy, pale pink blouse. The whole outfit was cute and modern, but not too dressy. She felt a little self-conscious at the way the blouse gaped low in front, but Marta assured her she could fix that with a pin. A

pair of denim ballerina flats completed her look, not seeing any reason to make herself over six feet tall with spike heels. Besides, her recently healed ankle wouldn't tolerate that kind of punishment.

She finished her hair, twisted up off her neck with a butterfly clip and then slicked some gloss over her lips. Satisfied that she looked 'put together', she sat on her bed staring at the clock. She still had fifteen minutes to go. There was no way she would go downstairs before six. That would look too eager.

She busied herself with taking the film out of her camera and stuck the roll into her purse, along with her lip-gloss. She checked her wallet for cash to pay for the film developing. Her fingers grazed over the credit card George had given her. It would never be used. That was another form of indebtedness she couldn't live with. She slid it into the back fold of her wallet, behind her Metropolitan Library and YWCA cards.

Five minutes to go. She checked her reflection in the mirror one more time. The skirt hugged her thighs and the curve of her butt. Thankfully she had a pair of thong underwear. Without them, the tight fitting skirt would show an ugly panty line across her cheeks. A wave of indecision flooded her. Marta and the store clerk insisted the skirt and blouse looked great on her. Her belly button peeked out from beneath the blouse, depending on how straight she carried herself. She practiced in the mirror to find the right posture so it wouldn't be over exposed. The pin really needed to be moved up higher on the blouse, but it looked pretty stupid there since it created an obvious pucker on the smooth fabric.

Sighing with resignation, she moved the pin back down between her breasts. At least it didn't show the front-closing clasp of her bra.

Six p.m. She swallowed a tight knot in her throat. Time to go downstairs and begin her date with Gabe.

\* \* \* \*

*Hot damn!*

Gabe stood up from lounging on the leather chair when he heard her steps on the stairs. God almighty, she looked fuckin' gorgeous in that tight little skirt. Her legs were much longer and more sleekly curved than he expected them to be, or remembered they were. And that blouse ... *oh hell*. It was teasingly see-through and cupped the full, roundness of her breasts, making his fingers itch to part the fabric and discover the shape of them for himself.

"You look great, sugar."

Her cheeks were hot spots of pretty color and she ducked her eyes at his simple greeting.

"Thanks. I'm not overdressed?"

He glanced down at his black jeans, newer black boots with silver toe tips and his silver-green Brioni dress shirt. His sister, Megan, had picked out the shirt for him, saying it looked great with his eyes.

"No, just right." He flipped his black Stetson on his head and reached for her hand. "Ready?"

"Yes, I'm starving."

Lordy, she brought out all the protective male instinct in him. She didn't look fragile, but he sensed her insecurity in

the way she kept chewing her bottom lip. Once inside the cab of his truck, he smelled the sweet strawberry lip-gloss she wore. Most of it was already gone. Too bad, because he wanted to lick it off her lips. She kept tugging on the hem of her skirt, scooting her tight little ass on the leather seat. He had a hard time concentrating on driving as thoughts of her sitting on his lap ran through his mind.

His crotch ached already. He knew it would and prepared by jacking himself off in the shower. That quick release didn't seem to help much now. How would he make it through one of Chang's long, drawn out meals? The service was impeccable, but torturously slow.

She fidgeted again, squirming with the skirt hem as it crawled up her thighs.

"You're not nervous about being out with me, are you?"

She let out a tight little laugh. "No. Yes. Both I guess. I haven't actually been on a date in eons. You kinda forget how."

"Don't be nervous, Lilly. We're just going out together for a bite to eat, and to chat privately for a while. I won't drive you up to make-out point unless you ask first."

She stared at him, her eyes wide and so blue, the heavens would be put to shame.

"You're kidding about that, right? There really is a make-out point in Granite Springs?"

He chuckled. "I'm not kidding. It's a little place up in the hills off the highway where teenagers go. Has a beautiful view of the valley and town lights from there."

"Uh-huh. I take that to mean you've been there before? I thought you grew up and went to school in the city?"

"I did, until my junior year. By then I'd become too restless and my parents sent me out here permanently to live with Marta and Carlo. But don't worry, sugar, I don't own a membership card at the point. I only took one girl up there, after our senior homecoming football game win. And even though I was the team's quarterback, I didn't score with her because I forgot to buy condoms."

Lilly's laughter filled the truck cab. After several long minutes she wiped tears from her eyes. It had been a painful event for him then. Tracie was one of the 'experienced' girls in his class and he'd been lusting after her for months. Looking back on it now, yeah, it was pretty funny and typical for a horny boy that age.

After laughing at his expense she seemed to relax a bit more. She leaned her head against the seat and watched him quietly while he drove into town.

"Can we go up there, after dinner?"

He tried real hard to control the hammering of his heart and the sudden bounce his cock made against his zipper.

"Where? To make-out point? Sure. If that's what you'd like."

When she reached over to run her fingertips from his elbow to his wrist, he let go of the steering wheel with that hand and threaded his fingers into hers, giving her a little squeeze.

"I've never been to a make-out point. Always wondered what it would be like."

He rubbed his thumb across the tender skin inside her wrist, putting light pressure across the delicate bones and tendons there. That tiny spot on a woman's wrist was the first place his Sensi master had taught him about. It relaxed a skittish woman.

"Never? Not even when you were in high school? I thought all kids did that. It's sort of an American tradition."

"Where I went to school we didn't have a make-out point. Some of the kids went to the rest stops ... but I never had a boyfriend at that time so I never went. The cops caught a lot of them since it is a public place. Kind of embarrassing. My parents would have died." She turned her face to the window. "Oh my God, I can't believe I told you that."

He chose his next words very carefully, making sure to hold tighter onto her hand so she wouldn't suddenly pull away when she heard them.

"Lilly, are you a virgin?"

Her hand did flex inside his, but she didn't pull away.

She sighed, the sound very heavy and loaded with unspoken pain. "No. But it's been a long time. Does that matter?"

No matter what happened between them after dinner tonight, he promised himself he would not fuck her in the cab of this truck at make-out point. He wasn't an overly eager, horny boy anymore looking for a moment of privacy in the back seat of a car. No, he wanted her in his bed, flat on her back, dripping wet and wide open, totally eager for his cock after he finished suckling her from head to toe. She deserved

to be loved properly, as many times as she'd let him have her.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of her slender knuckles. "No, sugar, that doesn't matter. Thanks for telling me."

In the busy downtown streets of Granite Springs, Gabe parked the truck at Murphy's One-Hour Photo and supply shop. He had the unbelievable pleasure of watching Lilly's little fuck-me skirt hike up even further while helping her step down from the truck's high cab. He had the barest glimpse of her pretty ass cheeks and the scrap of black thong panties before she blushed and hurried to slide the skirt back down around her thighs.

Inside the store, he lingered in the background while she gave her film to old Stan Murphy behind the glass counter. He'd known Stan for a long time, since the days when he'd taken a photography class in high school as an elective. Stan nodded 'hello' to him and gave Lilly an appreciative once-over. The old geezer was a notorious gossipmonger. By tomorrow morning, anyone in the whole town who wanted to know ... would know that Gabe Abendstern was dating again.

And that she was living in his house.

Watching her while she filled out her ticket on Stan's counter, he hoped she wouldn't be affected by the change in attitude that was bound to happen when people in this small, tight-knit community found out about them. She'd been anonymous until now. He was used to it; the stares, the deferential treatment that normal folks paid to movie stars, singers, and to billionaires. It didn't matter that he was the



billionaire's son who worked hard as a rancher like so many other men in this part of the country.

Lilly left her film with Stan and joined Gabe at the door, sliding her hand back into his. He hugged it into the crook of his arm, drawing her closer.

"Wanna walk down to Chang's Chinese restaurant from here? It's about two blocks."

She looked around at the shops, the downtown area just starting to glow with evening lights. People were still shopping, chatting on the sidewalks.

"Sure. I'm wearing flats. Which way?"

He looked down at the sensible, no heel shoes that matched her skirt. "Smart girl. C'mon. It's down this way. 'Course, I could always carry you?"

"No." She grinned and poked her finger into his ribs. "Start walkin', cowboy. I'm hungry."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

An exquisite, graceful woman met Lilly and Gabe inside Chang's Chinese Restaurant.

"Gabriel." She smiled with genuine pleasure, her red, Cupid's bow mouth showing perfect pearly teeth. "It's good to see you again. You haven't been here in many months."

"Oh, I've been around, May-Ling. Just busy." He smiled at Lilly, and nodded to her for a quick introduction. "This is Lilliana Wilcox. My date."

"Welcome to Chang's."

"Thank you."

The hostess spoke in fully Americanized English, something that took Lilly by surprise. She was so accustomed to Chinese immigrants with their lyrical-broken English in the restaurants of New York.

"Come with me, please. I have a booth for you tonight."

She led them into the softly lit interior, wending her way into the back toward a red cloth covered table.

Lilly scooted into the far side of booth, careful to keep her damn skirt from hiking up again. She'd already flashed Gabe once while climbing down from his big truck. The hostess took a moment to light the candle in the center of their table. Gabe tossed his hat on the opposite edge and then slid in beside Lilly. His long, hard leg pressed inviting warmth into her bare skin from her thigh all the way down to her ankle. He leaned back, raked one hand through his thick hair and casually

draped his arm over the top of the booth around her shoulders.

May-Ling's sharp, obsidian eyes never flickered with too much interest. She smiled sweetly from her bright red, perfectly shaped lips.

"Tonight we have a special, lobster tail medallions with shitake mushroom and pearl onions, served over buckwheat noodles. Highly recommended." She set two menus on the table and poured lemon ice water into their glasses. "Would you like your regular bottle of wine?"

Gabe handed Lilly a menu. "I don't think we need wine tonight. Something else, Lilly?"

"I'd love a coconut daiquiri."

"Coconut daiquiri for my lady. I'll have a Tsing Tao beer, chilled mug."

May-Ling nodded, her curtain of long, silky black hair shimmered down her back in the candlelight when she walked away.

The restaurant was discreetly decorated with fanciful dragons and fat-bellied Buddha's. The piped in music was pure country, not the typical tinkling tunes sung by tiny Chinese courtesans in the restaurants Lilly was familiar with. And the place was packed—not a single table or booth was unoccupied. Couples, families with young children, a group of loud, giggling older women celebrating a birthday—all seemed to be having a great time. She opened her menu, only too aware of the heat radiating from Gabe's body. Her own hands and feet had turned to ice.

*Nerves. Just relax. He's giving you all the cards to hold. Pick and choose what you want to do.*

"What do you recommend? I'll eat anything as long as it doesn't moo. Sorry."

Gabe chuckled softly. "If Mr. Chang is fixing a special, that's what I recommend. You can't go wrong with his specials. Do you like lobster?"

"God yes. Don't get much of it, but I love it." She flipped her menu closed and slid it back onto the table.

"Me too. I'm not usually picky with whatever Marta fixes for dinner. But sometimes, I crave something else. And don't let her ever hear you repeat that, she'll go on strike and not cook for weeks. Carlo would kill me if I complain again."

"Oh, you poor guys. Starving." She let the sarcastic teasing in her voice be buffered by a giggle. "Wouldn't want that. I love to cook. And bake. But I don't usually have the time to do it right, so I improvise with Stouffer's and Campbell's."

He swirled his water glass, sending the lemon slice into a spin against the ice. "Oh, I'm familiar with them too. How do you think Carlo and I survived for two weeks? It was hell. I learned my lesson. Whatever that woman will cook for me, I eat it. No complaints."

May-Ling returned with a tray carrying their drinks. "What did you decide for dinner?"

"We'll both have the special, of course."

"Of course." She smiled prettily and departed again.

Lilly noticed that May-Ling served only them, ignoring other tables. Younger, eager-eyed wait-staff took orders on

little notepads at the other tables and then carried fragrant meals from the kitchen to serve them.

"So, tell me why you were so restless in New York as a kid? What did you do that convinced your parents to let you stay out here in Montana, away from them?"

Gabe cleared his throat. "I was accused of getting a girl pregnant the summer before my junior year. She named me as the father. I confronted the kid who really did that to her, beat him up pretty bad. His parents sued. I got angry, wrecked my dad's car after giving the cops a good long chase. The courts wanted to send me to live in a juvenile detention home. Two days later, I was here. Parked for good."

Lilly's eyes widened, her fingers frozen in mid-air when she reached for her daiquiri. "You didn't ... have sex with her?"

"No. Even at that age, I knew better than to have unprotected sex. Both my parents drilled responsibility for my own actions into my head at an early age. They were strict, and rightfully so. Besides, I barely knew the girl. She invited me to a party at her house, lured me into her bedroom. I admit, I thought I'd struck gold. But I didn't come prepared to have sex that night and she tried to convince me it would be okay because she was on the pill. I got cold feet. Lost my nerve. Good thing, too."

She let the cool, sweet coconut drink slide down her throat. Thankfully, it only had a little rum in it. "I knew girls like her, we had one pregnant classmate at graduation too. But nothing like what you described happened in our little town. Her parents accepted her baby as their own child when

she went off to college. No muss, no fuss, I guess. What happened to the girl you knew?"

Gabe took a long draught of his frothy beer in the frosted mug, his eyes focused with a hard glint on the activity of other tables. "She had an abortion. Or so I heard. I don't really know, since the court prohibited contact between us."

"Oh. I'm sorry for her."

"Yeah." He sipped his beer again, shifting a little in the booth to face her. "My turn. Tell me why you were working as a hooker that night we met?"

Lilly choked on her drink. She grabbed her napkin and pressed it against her mouth. He thumped her back with his hand, leaning closer with genuine concern riding his face. When she finally managed to squeeze air back into her lungs he started a slow massage on the muscles between her shoulder blades.

"Oh my God." She bit her lip, hard, welcoming the brief pain she caused herself. "I really wish that night hadn't happened."

"Why not? We wouldn't have met."

She played with the edge of her cloth napkin, careful to keep her face averted. He was leaning in too close, his eyes burning with hot, male curiosity.

"Don't judge me by that, Gabe."

He moved his mouth up to her ear and placed a soft kiss in her hair. "I'm not judging you, Lilly. I want to know why, since it's so obviously out of character for you."

The soft sound of his deep voice and the gentle kiss made her shiver with delight, despite the rushing embarrassment

pounding inside her conscience. She took a deep breath, grateful for the warm hand kneading into her back.

"I was ... desperate. My roommate at the time, a wonderful friend whom I cherish to this day, worked as an escort. She only took the highest paid, most confidential jobs. The contract that night was for twelve girls. They were short by one, since a girl dropped out unexpectedly that day. At the last minute, Glory asked if I'd fill in. I knew I shouldn't, but I really needed that money. And so I did." She choked out the last word. "Dammit! It's not something I'm proud of."

Gabe wrapped his arms around her and snuggled her into his embrace. If it weren't for his tight support, she thought she'd melt into the carpet and disappear from sight.

"I understand. I just wanted to know if that was something you'd kept hidden, to support yourself while you tried to establish your name and career in the art world. It's okay, sugar."

Lilly pulled out of his embrace, sitting up straight. "Okay, so now you know why I was there. Please don't mention it again. It was horribly embarrassing and very scary for me."

"I promise never to say another word about it. But I'm glad you told me the truth. The contradiction was tearing me apart."

His hand moved from her back to rest on her bare thigh. The warmth and feel of his large, callused palm on her skin sent a jolt of awareness up the inside of her leg. He rubbed from side to side ... inside her thigh, outside, and back.

Oh, God. She swallowed a moan of pleasure. What would happen if his fingers traveled all the way up the inside of her

skirt? Would he dare touch her there—in a restaurant? Oh yes! He would. Should she let him? Only naughty girls did this kind of thing. Just the thought felt decadent and thrilling and she wanted very much to have the guts to do it. She scanned the other tables, grateful to see that none of the people sitting there paid any attention to them. The red tablecloth would hide anything that went on under the table from view.

She was ready to lean back against the booth a little and inch her legs apart, hoping he'd understand that small gesture as an invitation to explore further. But the graceful approach of May-Ling stopped her. The hostess placed two bowls of hot won-ton soup in front of them and left again.

"That was fast," Lilly blew out a shaky breath.

Gabe's wide grin and sparkling eyes told her he knew she enjoyed his caress on her thigh. He placed her napkin across her lap, letting his fingers linger on the bare skin with promise. She stared at the spoon he handed her as if she'd never seen one before.

"Eat. You're gonna need your strength."

"It looks wonderful." She sniffed the rising steam. "Mmm, smells delicious."

He watched her. "Sure does," he drawled. Then he focused on his soup.

She slurped delicately, alternating between blowing to cool each spoonful. Gabe did the same but took bigger mouthfuls, enjoying it with obvious relish. He finished quickly and pushed his bowl aside.

"Would you like another drink?" He drained his beer.

"No thanks."



"Good." He leaned in to put his lips on her temple, speaking into the hair near her ear. "Because I want you fully aware of everything I'm gonna do to you, sugar."

Lilly finished her soup, being very careful not to allow him to see how hot and bothered his words made her. She shouldn't look too eager, should she? No, she had to be subtle and sly about her wants. Let him guess. Let him figure it out.

It was time to play.

"Is that so?" She leaned back against the booth, thrilling to the feel of his lips when they brushed against her ear. "Maybe you should tell me what you have planned, cowboy?"

He didn't waste any time. His hand slid possessively over her thigh and gently nudged her legs further apart. She gasped. She felt the heat of his fingers beyond the silky fabric covering her pussy. And it throbbed with sudden need.

"You shouldn't play with fire, Lilly. I know this game. I'm not sure you do."

"Wha..." she panted. "What game?"

"This." He stroked across the crotch of her thong, the whole time maintaining a pleasant, innocent look on his face. His lids lowered across lust-darkened eyes, the candle flame reflecting deep inside them.

Lilly stiffened on the seat, so afraid she'd start moaning in public and give everyone a display to talk about later.

"Stay still," he whispered, watching her closely. "Just like that. Pretend we're having a nice, private little chat."

"Oh, we definitely are."

"Oh, yes. The most private kind." His fingers swept the wet fabric covering her pussy aside.

"Oh God. I can't believe I'm doing this. In public."

His fingers stilled. "Do you want me to stop?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Uh-uh. Open those pretty eyes and look at me. Say it."

She forced her eyes open and back to his, concentrating on the thick fringe of his upper lashes. "Don't stop."

He leaned in to seal their lips together. His tongue slicked across the seam of hers and she opened for him, moaning into his mouth as he filled her. At the same time, he gently parted her womanly folds and speared a finger inside the rim of her pussy, bathing in the hot cream before he stroked up to her clit. She wanted him to penetrate deeper, but her skirt wouldn't allow her to spread her legs any further apart, unless he pushed it all the way up to her hips. He teased and toyed with her sensitive bud, lightly circling it and then delving down again to gently poke inside her hot, pouting core.

Lilly whimpered with need.

"Come for me, sugar. Right here. Nobody will know."

He nipped her earlobe with his teeth, and then sucked it into his mouth. His fingers set up a short, hard rhythm against her clit and just inside the tantalizing opening of her vagina. Sparks sizzled under her skin, between the delicious torture of his teeth and tongue on her ear and the barely-fucking pressure of his fingers between her legs.

She grabbed the tablecloth with both hands and braced for the orgasm just beyond her reach.

"That's it, love."

"Oooh," she moaned softly. "You never called me that before. Oh, oh. Gabe!"

The walls of her womb squeezed and sucked at his probing finger. A hot curl of pleasure licked up her spine and settled back down inside her belly. She quivered and jerked with the gush of pure, sexual gratification.

"Sshh." His voice was erotically raspy. "Don't make a sound, Lilly. Keep your eyes open. Breathe. Just feel it, let it flow through your body. Feel the release, the sweetness it leaves behind."

When the last delicious tremble passed through her body, he pulled out of her pussy and slid the crotch of her thong back in place. He gave it a little pat for good measure.

Embarrassment rushed through her. She turned her face away from his, nervously scanning the other guests. She squeezed her legs together and tried to extinguish the flames he'd lit between her thighs.

"Wow. I can't believe I just did *that* in a restaurant."

His hand rubbed between her shoulder blades again, with soothing firmness. "*That* was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Thank you, Lilly."

She coughed delicately. "You're thanking me? I think it has to be the other way around. I got all the pleasure out of *that*."

May-Ling appeared at their table again, carrying a large tray with their meals. A fresh wave of heat rushed into Lilly's face, making her suddenly crave her melting, lemon flavored ice water. She drained the glass.

"May I offer you another daiquiri? Another beer?"

"No thanks." They answered together.

Lilly giggled. She felt light-headed already, and sort of limp from the unexpected orgasm. The lobster dish sat in front of her but she had no appetite for that kind of food now. Gabe stared at her, lifting one brow in question.

"May-Ling? Please wrap our dinners to go. We have an appointment to keep."

Ever pleasant and discreet, May-Ling reloaded the tray and headed back into the kitchen.

"You read my mind. This is very bad news, Gabe. Am I so transparent?"

"Not at all. I took a lucky guess that you're hungry for something, shall we say, firmer?"

"Firmer." She repeated. "Yes. Definitely firmer. Hot and juicy, too."

"Oh yeah, sugar. My specialty, hot and juicy. Long and slow? Or hard and fast?"

Her jaw moved at first, but no sound came out. She had to swallow first. "I don't want to be greedy."

"Please do. There's plenty of it to go around. And around."

"Can I try both?"

"Absolutely." He smiled. The look was purely male, very satisfied and confident. "*That* will be my pleasure."

May-Ling returned with a bag containing their uneaten lobster meals. Gabe reached into his back pocket, drew out his wallet and handed her what Lilly thought looked like a one hundred dollar bill.

"Thank you, May-Ling. The service was impeccable, as always." He slid over to the edge of the booth and reached for Lilly's hand to help tug her out of that tight spot.

"You're always welcome, Gabriel. Enjoy your evening. Good-bye, Miss Wilcox. I hope we see you again."

Outside, the night air had cooled considerably. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. "Wow, it's getting cold out here."

"Come `ere." He draped his arm over her shoulder and tucked her into the warmth of his body. She gratefully accepted it and snuggled up to his chest and hip as close as walking allowed. He hugged her even closer. "Now I regret not parking nearby. For more reasons than it's cold out here."

"I'm warm now."

"Not nearly enough, sugar. Not nearly enough."

By the time they reached his truck, she felt invigorated by their quick walk. He unlocked the doors with his remote and opened it for her.

"Gonna show me that sexy little ass again now, or do I have to wait?"

She grabbed the restaurant bag from his hand, laid it on the dashboard and turned around to face him. "You think my ass is sexy?"

"Hell yeah." He leaned one arm on the door, the other on the seat, trapping her in between.

A delicious little thrill crept up from her toes, through her knees, making them wobbly and weak. Her butt cheeks tingled as if he'd touched her there already. She reached out with both hands and smoothed them across his broad

shoulders, admiring the softness of his shirt and the firmness underneath. The thought of slipping each button out of its hole, one by one, excited her. She wanted to slowly unwrap this hard, sexy man.

"I need my photos, remember?"

"Witch." He squeezed his eyes shut, as if in pain. "Get on up there. I'll get your pictures for you."

Lilly reached for her purse. "Here, take this twenty."

"Put it away."

"But..."

"Don't even think about it, Lilly. Keep your money. It's a small thing for me to do, and I want to."

She climbed up to the seat, not really caring anymore if she flashed him her ass. When she was seated, he reached across and buckled her in. He took his sweet time finding the buckle, and nuzzled his cheek against her breasts. Lilly moaned and squirmed on the seat.

"Hang on to that thought. I'll be right back, sugar."

"Thanks, cowboy."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"What's going through that pretty head of yours, Lilly?"

She looked up from the twisting, grasping knot of her fingers when he climbed into the truck and handed her the packet of photos.

"Nothing, really." She took the packet from him. "Thanks."

"Something bad?"

Gabe started the engine. Pale blue light from the dashboard washed over her pretty face. Her eyes gleamed like raw silver. A worry line settled in between her slender, golden brows.

She shook her head. "Just some old memories that would be better off swept out the back door. Really, it's nothing. I guess I'm anxious to ... get home. To the ranch."

She looked out the window instead of meeting his eyes. Something was bothering her, and he damn well knew what.

She was scared.

He'd been inside Murphy's One-Hour photo shop for less than five minutes. Apparently that was enough time for her sated lust to cool and allow the bad things that skulked around in her past to return.

"I see. I guess that means you'd rather not drive up to make-out point now."

"Would you mind too much, if I took a rain check on that?"

"Not at all. Whenever you wanna see the view from up there, you let me know. Okay? Let's go home."

Damn! Gabe burned from the inside out. His skin was on fire, sizzling with the need for her touch. The inferno she'd lit inside him in the restaurant wouldn't die down anytime soon. He was already riding the fine line of his self-control ... and she stretched him to the limit. At least the drive back to the ranch would give him some time to talk to her, without her running away from him again. She did that too much. Every time she became overwhelmed with her emotions she turned away.

"Gabe ... I'm sorry. I'm not a tease."

God, she was tearing his heart to shreds. Her eyes gleamed with unshed tears and one of them spilled over onto her cheek.

"Sugar, I know that. And if you keep cryin' now, I'm gonna have to pull over to console you properly."

She quickly wiped her tears away with her hands and then rubbed the wetness on her denim skirt. "I hate crying. God, you must think the worst of me now! First I tease you like some horny slut, and now I'm..."

"You're what?"

He waited for her to finish, but silence stretched across them like the endless horizon of this land. He pressed his truck a little faster, past the speed limit, wanting to get home so he could talk to her face to face and hopefully, figure out why she'd gone all cold and distant again. She was folding in on herself like a crumpled piece of paper.

"Lilly. Are you scared? Are you afraid of what I'll do to you if you come to my bed?"



She bent her head and resumed twisting her fingers into knots. He reached over and caressed her fingers apart, stealing one small, soft hand into his, pulling it closer to him.

"Because that's how it will be ... you come to my bed. Your choice, your decision. I won't force you to come to me and I won't go to you. The offer is there. Take it. Or leave it."

"I understand what you're saying." She nodded, her eyes glued to their clasped hands.

"That's good, sugar. Because I want to help you. I want to hold you close and make love to you."

Gabe let his words sink in, gave her the last few miles before they reached the ranch to mull them over and ask any more questions she might have brewing behind those gorgeous, glowing eyes. He fought back the beast in him that roared and clawed its way to the surface, wanting to convince her she belonged in his bed tonight and to hell with whatever demons lurked in her past. If she didn't want him to know about them yet, that was her right too. The best he could do was make her aware of his desire, and let her know he cared and wanted to help—if she wanted it.

He made the drive up the hill to the house without slowing down. The truck's huge tires rattled and bumped across the potholes. Tomorrow, he'd have one of his men grade the road again, before he pulled the horse trailer to the rodeo arena.

He squeezed her hand softly before letting go so that he could park. He turned off the ignition, sending the cab into near darkness. It was perfect for asking more questions. She wouldn't feel as if he could see the emotions riding her face

as easily, so might be more willing to tell him the truth. He shifted in his seat to face her dark shadow.

"Marta hinted that you're not going to the Cattleman's Ball with me. Why?"

A sharp intake of breath announced her surprise. "She told you? I was going to tell you. I didn't find the right moment yet. I guess now is the right time. No, I'm not going."

"She didn't tell me. Don't blame her for my knowing now. I asked her about making sure you had the right attire. She said you didn't and that you didn't want to."

"Well, I don't. On both counts."

"Meaning, you don't want to be my date? I like dancing with you, Lilly. I'd like to do it again."

"Fine. Then don't be too shocked when I show up in a pair of jeans, okay? Because that's all I have left to wear now."

So that's what this is about! She rankled over the fact she didn't have a dress. "Promise you'll dance with me there."

Her sigh was both ragged and impatient. "I promise, I'll dance with you at the Cattleman's Ball. Happy?"

"Yes, thank you. I keep my promises, sugar. Make sure you don't break yours."

"I won't. Now quit harping on me about that. Can we go inside now?"

Inside the house, he flicked on the kitchen lights and put the forgotten lobster meals in the refrigerator. Lilly excused herself to use the bathroom, leaving him alone in the silence with only the hum of the refrigerator to keep him company.

Things were much too quiet whenever Marta and Carlo weren't home. He liked the homey noises they made, their

spirited bickering in Spanish and the sound of their soft, stolen kisses when they thought he couldn't hear them. Since Lilly had moved in, he found he enjoyed the sound of her feminine laughter. He'd heard it the first time when she teased Carlo about finding his socks in the living room and threatened to tell Marta on him. He loved hearing her chat quietly with Marta in the morning, two women sharing their secret bond. At night, he loved watching her work, curled up on the sofa with the lamplight shining in her hair and a studious frown on her face while her pencil flew across her sketchpad. She was remarkably industrious, never idle, never claiming boredom.

And that painting—it was just damned gorgeous. He already knew he wouldn't let it leave here. His dad and the magazine editors could find another artist to do another ranch painting. This one belonged to him.

Hearing the water turn off in the bathroom, he poured a glass of wine for himself and for Lilly, choosing the Far Niente merlot she enjoyed most. He hoped she'd take it and relax a little so they could talk some more.

"Gabe."

He turned toward her voice. It was coming from the game room. He carried both glasses of wine across the hall. Lilly stood in the doorway. She'd taken the clip out of her hair and the silky red mass framed her face with softness. After nibbling her bottom lip again, she reached over to the wall switch and pushed the dimmer control down until the light was almost gone.

"What are you doin', sugar?"

Her feet were bare; she made no sound as she walked over to him. She took the glass he offered and sipped, keeping her luminous blue eyes on his. He lifted his glass and took a long drink, needing the fortitude not to grab her on the spot and kiss her senseless.

After one sip, she set her wineglass on the table near the door. She took his and placed it beside hers.

"We don't need that," she said, her voice husky warm, her breath smelling of sweet wine.

She reached out to him with both hands, rubbing, kneading his muscles up from his elbows to his shoulders. Fire licked inside his groin. He fought to keep his own hands off the inviting curve of her bare waist. That lacy little blouse let her tempting belly button play hide and seek with him all night long.

"What do you want, Lilly?"

She stepped closer, rubbing the soft, hot tips of her breasts against his chest, her fingers digging into his shoulder muscles. He ground his teeth together, wanting to growl out his approval at the delicious pressure of her nipples.

"Lilly," he warned. "You have to tell me what you want."

"Mmm," she moaned, flattening her breasts against him. "You, Gabe. I want you."

His cock was a rigid tree trunk inside his jeans, aching to be free. He stood with his back to the empty pool table. He leaned back against it now and propped his hands on the edge, grabbing the polished wood for all he was worth. That didn't even come close to what he really wanted in his hands,

to wrap them around her curvy hips and grind his hardness into her soft mound.

"Want me to do what? Talk me through it. Tell me everything you want me to do, first."

Her hands stopped their urgent kneading and she looked up at him with shy surprise. She tipped her face up higher, her eyes focused on his mouth.

"Gabe." She whimpered. "Kiss me. Touch me. Touch me all over. Make me forget my past. Erase it, put a new, fabulous memory there for me to cherish forever."

He nuzzled her slim little nose with his, but didn't touch her tempting mouth yet. "Only one fabulous memory, Lilly?"

She stood up on her tiptoes to reach his lips and breathed across them. So sweet. So promising was the dark pink velvet of her kiss. "No. Lots of fabulous memories. As many as you can give me. Please."

His arms snapped around her like steel bands and crushed her against him. He spoke the words into her mouth. "That was the magic word, sweet Lilly. Please."

\* \* \* \*

Lilly swam in the heady, hot, melting comfort of his mouth. Gabe's tongue slammed into hers, claiming it in a wild dance. He pressed her so close their teeth clicked together. She couldn't breathe from the tight embrace. When she suddenly felt the floor leave her feet, she realized he'd picked her up and switched places. She now had the pool table to her back. He lifted her hips again and settled her on top of the green cloth.

Gabe pushed her with his body until she lay down. Her buttocks rested on the wooden ledge. Strong, gentle hands lifted her skirt up to her hips, nudged her knees apart before he stepped into the cradle of her thighs with the hard ridge of his cock.

"I'm so hungry for you." He panted against her neck, licking and nipping her with his teeth.

"Oh God, me too." She struggled for a moment when he caught her wrists. "Let me touch you."

"Not yet. I'm on the edge, Lilly. I need to have you in my mouth, every delicious spot I can find. Now."

He held her hands off his body, pinning them out to the side. His mouth found her collarbones and laved them, sending flames shooting from her head to her toes. He didn't stay there, he moved, down between her breasts.

"I'm gonna eat you, Lilly. You know what that means, right?"

She bucked with the erotic words. Just the thought of his talented mouth on her steamy, soaking wet pussy almost made her come. "Yes. I know, I know."

He sucked on one nipple through the lacy fabric of her blouse and then released it. "I'll savor these beauties later, they need more time."

"Oh my..." she panted. "Gabe, please."

Her hands were suddenly free again and she dug them into his thick hair. She clung to him as his head dipped down to her exposed navel. He licked around it, and then gently poked his tongue inside. She quivered and gasped, her stomach jerking with each dip and lick.

She heard herself moaning like a wounded animal, not believing that sound came from her own throat. His hands slid up her thighs, the callused palms leaving a scorching trail in their wake. He pushed her thong panties aside, exposing her wet flesh beneath.

"Not good enough," he growled into her belly. He pulled her legs together and whipped the thong off, dragging it down her legs until it slipped off her feet.

"Open," he ordered. His hands pressed between her thighs and spread her legs wide. Cool air rushed over her exposed pussy, chilling the hot, seeping juices that ran from her. She had no strength to deny him access to her body.

She held her breath. His head dipped between her legs. He kissed the tender, quivering skin of her inner thighs, moving closer. She heard him breathe in her musky essence and sigh. Then he slicked his tongue from bottom to top, separating the tender inner lips.

"Gabe!" She raised her hips off the pool table, following the path of this most intimate, hot kiss. "I can't stand it. More. More. Please!"

His husky chuckle vibrated against her clit. He kissed the downy thatch of hair covering her mons, then let his tongue thread through until he found her throbbing little bud. He circled it, nipped at it, and caressed it with the tip of his tongue. Then he sucked it between his lips and held it captive, not letting go. Fingers probed and stretched the entrance to her core, while his tongue flicked across her captive clit. He slid two fingers inside her, pressing them in, pulling them out. He spread her wetness down to the skittish

area of skin between her tender vaginal opening and her anus. He teased the tight little hole before slipping the tip of one finger inside it. An explosion of pleasure danced up through her spine.

"Oh, my God. Yes, so good. Feels *so good*." She squeezed her eyes shut at the exquisite torture of his mouth on her clit and the magic his fingers created.

His tongue speared into her cunt, seeking the deep entrance and filling her for just a few delicious inches. The tightly wound coil in her lower belly snapped and unwound in a sizzling spiral of sparks. Her pussy clenched and milked his tongue in her climax; her belly contracted into a tight knot before flowering open and releasing the wonderful pressure he'd built up inside her. Gabe continued to lick and suck and kiss her throbbing, wet flesh.

Lilly lay still on the pool table, trembling and twitching with tiny aftershocks. Dear God, if he could do that with his tongue and mouth, what would he be able to do with that magnificent, huge cock?



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Lilly-love," Gabe's deep voice rumbled against her neck again, sending more delicious shivers across her skin.

"Upstairs. My bed. Now."

She panted, unable to speak.

He licked her neck and moved up to her ear, leaving a tingling, cool wet trail that made her shiver all over again.

"Now, Lilly."

"I ... I can't."

He nipped the tender skin beneath her ear, sending a sharp spark of pleasure-pain into her blood. "No, Lilly. Sweet God, don't do this now."

"Gabe. I'm not doing anything. I'm too ... I can't feel my legs. I don't think I can walk."

He growled into her ear and her eyes flew open from the warning sound. His arms swept beneath her back and hips, lifting her off the pool table. Her world spun like a carnival ride while he carried her up the stairs and down the hallway.

She couldn't stop from smiling with satisfaction when she spotted the determined line of his firm jaw. His heart pounded in her ear where her head rested against his chest. She tucked her nose into his shirt collar, and inhaled his musky, spicy scent. A rush of heat settled inside her pussy.

Her world spun once again when he stood her up suddenly in the hallway, and pinned her shoulders against the wall to steady her on her bare feet. He swept down for another kiss, a soft promise in his demanding mouth. The door to his

bedroom stood wide open. He reached inside for the wall switch without taking his eyes off her, and flicked on the bedside lamps.

"Here's where you make your last decision about us, Lilly. You step inside that door, and you're mine. I'll take you, in more ways than one. Or, you walk down to your own room. Now."

She glanced sharply inside the door, to his bed. "Please, Gabe. I want you. I *need* you."

"Then walk inside."

Her arms and legs felt limp, worse than overcooked linguine. She regained her balance and he dropped his hands from her shoulders, taking a step away. She swallowed past her suddenly dry throat. "I want this. I really do, more than you can imagine. But I *am* scared, Gabe. I don't want to be hurt ... again."

Sexual tension flowed from his body in waves, the heat and energy carried by his wonderful scent. She looked down, studying the pattern in the wool rug beneath her toes. His hand came under her chin and brought her head back up, up to those sparkling, lust-darkened eyes.

"Lilly. I promise, I won't hurt you. Never, never hurt you, sugar. I only want you so bad, I'm gonna go up in flames here. Make up your mind. Do it now."

She dipped her head into his hand and gently kissed the strong fingers that held up her chin. Giving him a shy smile, she moved to his door, to the threshold of her future. From this point onward, she vowed to erase the painful memories and replace them. With memories of Gabe. His scent already

branded her soul, she'd never forget it. His mouth, the sensuous velvet of his tongue and firm lips, scorched her skin so that she'd never forget them. All that remained was to find the promise his body offered. His long, thick cock would fill her and take away the deep-seated need inside that ached and cried for comfort, for healing.

Yes, she wanted to be sexually healed by a man who promised to be gentle and careful with her.

A man she trusted.

She took one step inside, her eyes darting over to the large bed. She wrapped her arms around herself. This was her choice.

One more step inside and she stood fully in the space of his bedroom. He kicked off his boots, and the sound of them landing one by one on the wood floor made her jump. His hands settled over her shoulders, offering warm, solid reassurance. He pressed his body close to hers from behind, fitting her buttocks to the hard ridge inside his jeans. He nuzzled her hair, drawing a deep breath before exhaling.

"Mmm, you smell so good. You're mine now, Lilly-love. It's just you and me and nobody else in our past. I promised to make this good for you. Go to my bed and lay down. I'll be right back."

"Don't leave me." She stiffened at the pitiful sound of fear in her voice.

"I'm not leaving. My condoms are in the bathroom."

"I'm on the pill, Gabe. Honest."

He walked around her to stand face to face, a measure of fury in the hard line of his mouth. His hands grasped firmly onto her upper arms. "Lilly..."

"No, listen to me. I wouldn't lie to you about that. I *don't* want to get pregnant yet. I can't afford to."

"You said you weren't dating. Why else be on the pill?"

"I started taking it my first year of college because of dysmenorrhea. That's the clinical term for painful menstruation. In my case, I also had very heavy bleeding. I was anemic and too weak to attend classes whenever I had my period. My doctor gave two options—surgery, or go on the pill to see if it would help. It did. For the first time since I was thirteen, I had a normal period. I'm still on it now . Not because I wanted to fuck every guy I met and not get pregnant."

He studied her for a long time, weighing her words, the emotions flitting across his handsome face. Some of the anger melted away. He hugged her close again, rubbing her back with his large hands, massaging her spine in that wonderful way he had. "I'm sorry. I told you about my experience with a girl who promised me that before, and I don't want to risk an unplanned pregnancy either. I believe you, Lilly. I trust you."

"Thank you." She lifted her face from his shoulder and smiled. "I think it's only fair that we trust each other. Especially now. We're both responsible adults, Gabe, not young kids."

"I've always known I was responsible for my own actions, even when I was a kid. And I've always worn a condom to

make love to a woman. Are you sure you don't want me to now?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Lilly reached up to touch his cheek and the smooth, hard skin covering his jaw. "I want to feel you, Gabe."

He hugged her tight against his chest, planting kisses on the top of her head, rubbing his lips in her hair. "This will be my first time skin to skin with a woman, sugar. Thank you."

She sighed against his shirt collar. "My, aren't we a pair of conscientious adults. All this clinical talk kinda takes the thrill out of doing it. Maybe they should teach this in sex ed class."

He groaned into her hair. "I wouldn't know it. I'm still burning for you."

She trailed a fingertip from his chin, down the thick column of his throat to the top button on his shirt. "Then let me help put that fire out."

He allowed her to undress him, not offering assistance. One button at a time, she revealed the hard sculpture of his magnificent upper body. Pushing his shirt open, she palmed her hands on smooth, hot skin, caressing from his washboard abs, up over flat nipples, and finally across his powerful, broad shoulders. She tugged the shirt off his arms and he dropped it behind him.

"My God," she whispered. "You are one gorgeous man, Gabe."

"And I'm still wearing my pants."

She giggled, enjoying the light teasing between them now. Whoever said she couldn't be playful and have great sex? Smiling, she reached for his jeans, popped the button open

and inched the zipper down. His cock immediately sprang forward, seeking her hands.

"Don't you ever wear any underwear?"

"Too binding. And with you around, I'm always hard anyways so I figured, what's the point?"

She circled his shaft with both hands, amazed again at the thickness of him, as wide as her wrist. She marveled at the feel of his throbbing heat between her fingers and the silken texture of taut skin covering the living steel of his cock. Her thumbs grazed across the pouting hole, wiping the slippery pearl of pre-cum around his cock head. He jerked inside her hands.

"*Damn.*" He sucked in a sharp breath. "Lilly. Undress yourself for me, let me watch you do that."

She swallowed hard and then took several steps toward his bed, choosing to be closer to the lamplight. She wanted him to see everything. Her hands and fingers fumbled with the tiny pearl buttons on her blouse and she almost pricked her thumb with the forgotten pin. She let the blouse fall to the floor and reached between her breasts for the clasp of her bra.

"Slowly, sugar. This isn't a race."

She undid the clasp and her breasts spilled past the satin lace cups. She saw him stiffen his posture, his cock bounced up and down. In response, her nipples instantly puckered into tight peaks. She pulled the strap off one shoulder, slowly like he asked, and then the next, letting her bra drop on top of her blouse.

"Finish, Lilly. Take off your skirt and lay down."

He pulled the quilt and top sheet completely off the bed, never taking his eyes from her while she popped the button free and shimmied the skirt down her legs. She kicked it over to her blouse.

"Can we turn off the lights?"

"No." He took her hand, kissed it, and gently pulled her onto the bed. "I want you to watch me suckle your nipples. Watch my cock slide into your wet pussy; see exactly what I'm doing to you. And I want to see every emotion that crosses your face when you come with me inside you."

She knelt on the bed facing him, embarrassment flooded warmth into her cheeks and across her breasts. "I don't need to watch. I know what I look like."

"That's not the point, Lilly. You are so beautiful. I want to share this with you, not just give it to you."

"Lights on, then." She reached out and circled his flat, brown nipples. "I wanted to lick and nibble on you this afternoon, in the stable. Can I do that now?"

He caught her questing hands and held them away. "Oh no. I've been ready to come in my jeans since you walked into the barn. If you touch me now, I will. I want to be buried deep inside that beautiful pussy of yours when my passion flies."

"Oooh," she whimpered. Again the erotic images he invoked with his words had her whole body throbbing with need. The lips of her pussy plumped, wept and prepared for the invading promise of his cock. She arched into him, offering her breasts, craving his hot mouth and tongue on her aching nipples.

He didn't disappoint her. Cupping one, he bent his head down to taste the luscious pink tip of the other. She gasped at the intensity of pleasure that gave her and threaded her fingers into his hair. He growled against her skin, pillowing her full breasts together while sucking one nipple deep into his mouth. Tucking that engorged bud between his teeth, he curled his tongue around and around it. A streak of heat zipped down to her cunt. She could feel her juices dripping and tickling down the inside of her thighs.

"Gabe," she panted, "don't wait too long."

"Are you close again, sugar? Damn, we're gonna have to teach you some patience."

"Patience later. Fuck me now. *Please.*"

She landed on her back, not quite sure how he'd managed to flip her down so fast. He braced himself on his hands, trapping her between them and loomed over her like a hungry predator. "You talk dirty like that to me, Lilly-love, and I'll fuck you hard. Is that what you want right now?"

She focused her eyes on his wild face, flushed with desire. Her breath caught in her throat at the raw need she read there. "N-no, Gabe. No. Long and slow please."

Gabe lowered his body over hers, slowly crushing her tender breasts under the hard planes of his chest. His knee nudged between her legs and urged them apart. Then he settled the long, branding ridge of his cock on her belly. He licked the rim of her ear, and shivers slid down her body from her head to her toes. The only thing she could do was close her eyes and moan with delight.

"Such sensitive ears, so pretty. Are you wet for me, Lilly?"



She grabbed onto his shoulders and pulled him down harder, wiggling her hips against his. He leaned over to one side on his elbow so he could slip a hand down between their bodies. His fingers caressed her belly, through her soft pubic hair, tugging gently, teasing her lips apart. She held her breath, anticipating his questing probe of her readiness. She spread her legs and curled her knees up over his hips. His fingers slipped into her creamy slit and rubbed the slick, hot flesh up and down.

"Wet, so velvety and wet. I love the way your pussy is always so wet. I could eat you again, Lilly."

She arched her hips up, spreading her legs even wider, a cry of frustration escaping her throat. "No, no, I need you. Give me your cock. Please, Gabe. Do it slow."

"Open your eyes and watch. I want you to see me taking you, inch by inch."

He took control of her hips and lifted her up a bit more, positioning the bulging head of his cock at her tender opening. Lilly looked down between their bodies, and then back up to his eyes.

"Now, Gabe. Come into me now."

Did he grin, or grimace with pleasure? He pressed the head of his penis inside, the tight pressure of her cunt stretched over him made her gasp. *Dear God, he was big!*

"Easy, Lilly. I'll fill you up real slow."

True to his word, he slid inside her hot sheath with almost painful slowness. Did the look on his face reflect her own? He gritted his teeth, his eyes were pools of inky darkness, the tendons and veins corded on his neck from the effort.

"Lilly. Oh, sugar, you feel so good. So tight. Are you okay?"

"Oooh, yes. Move, Gabe. Move inside me. I'm tingling all over."

He pushed deep into her. And waited. She felt it throbbing inside her hot sheath, the primal ache of passion barely begun. He filled his palms with the swell of her breasts and played his thumbs over her erect nipples. Pleasure shot from both breasts down to her belly and surrounded her pussy. She clenched around his cock as he pulled out, almost all the way, and then slid back into her. Her breath caught and then rasped out on a throaty sigh of pure pleasure. Again he pulled out, this time a little quicker. She arched up higher, eager for his thrust back inside. The tingles that started when he first slid inside her escalated into tight coils of promise. He drove inside again, groaning his own pleasure, plumping and squeezing her nipples.

Lilly bowed against him, sending him deeper inside, her mind hazy and almost insane with arousal. "More, oh God."

"What ever you say, love."

Long, even strokes fed the fire raging inside her blood. Each push of his hips drove her one step higher, the slick, dripping walls of her vagina tightening around his thick cock with almost painful intensity. She shuddered.

Tremors fluttered deep inside her belly, until they shattered with an explosion of bright sparks behind her eyes. She squeezed her eyes shut, her pussy constricted and quivered and milked him. He pumped that glorious cock into her with long, even strokes. Was that her own voice,

screaming out her pleasure while wave after wave of blissful release tore through her body and mind?

"So beautiful, Lilly."

She felt drained, limp, and unable to move if her life depended on it. She heard him talking, whispering sweet words of encouragement as she rocked and shuddered with delicious aftershocks. His cock was still buried to the hilt inside her, still throbbing with need for his own release. She clenched the tiny muscles of her vagina around his length, and felt him jerk up high against the mouth of her womb. Not at all soft, not in the least bit flaccid.

"You didn't come," she mumbled in protest, her eyes fluttering open again.

"Not yet. That was for you." He leaned over and planted little kisses on her lips. "I'm waiting for round two ... if you're ready for me?"

Her pussy clenched around him again, sending a gush of hot juices to flood her velvety canal, bathe his cock. "Oh my God. Yes, please. Let's have round two."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

A whisper soft kiss like the faintest touch of a butterfly's wing landed on each of Gabe's eyelids. Without opening his eyes to her, he slid his hands down from the curve of Lilly's waist over the soft globes of her ass. She sprawled on top of him with one leg nestled between his. The downy soft thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs tickled his hip. He filled his hands with her butt cheeks and squeezed them gently. She wiggled in response, rubbing her luscious pussy over his hip and thigh.

She propped her chin on his left pectoral muscle. "Good morning."

"I take that to mean you slept well?" His cock filled with languid heat and bumped against her belly.

"Mmm, really well. That was quite the nightcap you gave me. Oh, and by the way, you snore."

Red-gold hair tangled around her face. She wore the warm, sleepy look of a woman who'd been truly sexually satisfied. A surge of pride swept through him, knowing he'd put that smile on her face.

"So do you," he grinned. "Such a sweet little snore."

Her head popped up off his chest. "I do not!"

"Are you calling me a liar, sugar?" He slipped one finger into the tempting valley between her nether cheeks.

The pupils of her eyes dilated, leaving a ring of dark blue around them. She tightened her butt muscles around his finger, holding it captive there. "Uh-uh. I don't snore." She

crawled up his torso and kissed him again, on the lips, cheeks and nose. "I'm starving. Want some breakfast?"

"I could eat you for breakfast, Lilly-love."

She pushed his hands away with a feminine growl. "Gabe, I'm serious. We didn't eat much last night. Food, that is, and I'm weak from hunger. Come on, I'll make us some pancakes."

He sat up when she bounced off the bed. She twirled around looking for her clothes, giving him a perfect show of her curvy hips and pink-tipped breasts. A victorious grin touched her sweet mouth when she spied his bathrobe draped over a chair. She wrapped herself in it, cinching the belt snug around her waist.

"Now that's a beautiful package. My robe never looked so good." He moved off the bed and reached out to grab her.

"Food first." She darted away, laughing. She grabbed his sweatpants and tossed them at him. "Now move it, cowboy. It's not nice to keep a hungry woman waiting."

Downstairs in the kitchen, Gabe discovered how hungry he was after she started frying thick slices of peppered bacon and ladled out batter onto a flat griddle. He made coffee since it was the one thing he knew how to do without sending the kitchen up in smoke. He sipped, leaning against the counter near the stove, and watched her cook their breakfast. The feeling was so blissfully domestic. Without being too male chauvinistic about it, he happily admitted he enjoyed it very much. It felt good.

Lilly was efficient, graceful and fast in the kitchen. After spending time with Marta she knew where everything was

and how to use it. In less than half an hour, breakfast was ready.

He helped carry plates to the table, and held her chair out for her. "So, do you have any plans for today?"

"Other than work, no. Although, I can certainly think of some things I'd like to do." She poured maple syrup over her pancakes and dipped her finger in the oozing, amber puddle. Eyes closed, her pink tongue flicked out to lick it off with obvious relish and sensual promise.

He swallowed past a mouthful of bacon. Just the thought of that warm, wet mouth around his cock had it pushing against his sweats. "Careful, witch. I'm hard enough already to take you here on the kitchen table."

Lilly blushed and turned her attention back to her plate. "I'll tell you what I'd like to do today. Marta told me about a small hot spring, up past the western ridge. I've never seen one before. Can you take me there?"

"Sure. It's an all day trip, though, not easy going. About three hours ride up and back. You okay with that much riding?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Good. I'll make you a deal: you throw some food together to take along, and I'll saddle up our horses and bring them around front."

\* \* \* \*

They had climbed up into the mountains for a good hour before passing through an old-growth forest. The pine trees grew so thick they blocked out all but the most persistent

rays of sunshine. Breaking out of the pine forest, Gabe led them across a single-track trail that wound like a snake around the mountain. The drop-off promised instant death if one of the horses placed a hoof wrong.

Lilly refused to look down, preferring to stare at Gabe's broad shoulders swaying with Warrior's sure-footed steps. After that harrowing experience, he led her through a high-walled ravine where they had to lean across their horse's necks to keep from scraping their heads on low hanging rocks.

The little meadow they finally stopped in lay cradled between jutting peaks on all sides. There were no trees up here, only scrubby grasses and some late blooming wildflowers that somehow survived on nourishment from sheer rock. Mountain jays cackled above them and flitted through the sunshine on glossy indigo wings.

Lilly groaned, bone weary and saddle sore after very rough riding for the last three hours. She slid down from Dancer and winced at the stiffness in her legs when her feet made contact with the ground. Even after Gabe's vigorous lovemaking, she hadn't felt this much dull pain between her legs as she did from being in that damned saddle.

She heard him chuckle. "I warned you, sugar. I'll tie up the horses. You just try to walk it off."

"Thanks," she grimaced weakly, and handed the reins to him in passing. She wobbled down to where she could see a pool of iridescent green water between large boulders.

She felt more limber after walking, but the soreness between her seat bones remained with an insistent throbbing.

Gabe joined her at the boulders, carrying a rolled up blanket and the saddle bags over one shoulder.

The water shimmered, crystal clear and shallow except for a deeper section in the very center. The green color glowed like neon spray paint over yellow, lime encrusted rock walls. The hot spring wasn't very big, more narrow and long, rather than round like the lake or pond she had envisioned.

Lilly put her hand in his and took a step forward over sharp, jutting rocks the size of pumpkins. "It's so beautiful, I can't even begin to describe that color. It's like an electrified green. What's it caused by?"

"It's a type of heat-tolerant algae," Gabe put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "In the winter it turns to reddish-brown."

"Any idea how long the spring has been here?"

"Oh, hundreds of thousands of years. It was probably created during one of the first ice ages, when the mountains of Montana were being pushed up into the shapes we know today. More than likely, an underground aquifer of melted glacier water got trapped in that upheaval and formed this hot spring. The Indians call it 'Mother's Tears'."

"Interesting. I don't know much about geology, although it's a fascinating subject. How hot is the water?"

"Just right for skinny dippin', sugar." He lay the saddlebags down on one boulder and set his hat on top of them. His hands went to the buckle on his belt and began to unfasten it.

She gaped at him, awestruck that it was an option. And why not? The place was secluded from prying eyes. "Oh, good



idea. I ache all over. A long soak in some hot water sounds wonderful.”

He wasted no time in taking off his clothes. Lilly hesitated, enjoying the view of his tight ass in broad daylight and the play of shadows that undulated on his skin with each movement. His cock bobbed up and down between his muscular thighs, long and very hard already. The thick veins that ran up both sides looked blue in the sunlight. He was so athletically fit, so well proportioned. Moisture soaked her crotch. He walked into the water up to his hips, sat down and sank under the surface until it reached his chin. His loud groan of contentment sent her scurrying to hurry up and join him.

At the edge of the spring, Lilly dipped her big toe in to test it. It was hotter than bath water, more like a hot tub without the bubbling jets. She followed the path he'd taken in and quickly immersed in relaxing, liquid heat. Her skin prickled in response, making her shiver reflexively. She closed her eyes to the sheer pleasure that surrounded every inch of her skin.

Gabe's hand closed over hers and drew her near, tugging her weightless body through the water. She landed on his lap, cradled with his arm behind her head while her hair fanned out in the water. His cock stirred and nudged into her hip.

She grinned at him, squinting past the sunshine. “Are you always hard and ready?”

“For you, yes.” His fingers wafted across her belly, creating hot currents in the water that fluttered the soft curls covering her pussy with teasing strokes.

Lilly arched her back, raising her breasts out of the water. The air felt suddenly much colder than it had before she got in. Her nipples hardened instantly. Quickly she sank those sensitive tips back under.

He chuckled. "Yeah, getting out is gonna be a bitch. That's why I brought the blankets."

"I think I'll stay in the water. I don't care if I shrivel up like a prune."

"Suits me just fine."

He circled one nipple with the tip of his finger, then flicked over the responsive bud lightly. Heat from the water blazed across her skin. She gasped with delight. "Oh, do that again."

The other nipple was given the same light, flickering touch. She raised her arms over her head and let them float and tangle in her hair. His palm covered that breast and delicately squeezed the plump, hot flesh. Pleasure streaked down into her pussy, releasing her creamy juices into the water. She slanted her eyes open and flashed him a seductive smile.

"Can I get a massage, cowboy? I'm kinda sore."

"Where?" He let his hand wander down her ribs, over her belly, and down to the ache between her thighs. "Here?"

She closed her eyes again and spread her legs with invitation. "Yes. There."

Gabe cupped her with his big hand, letting his fingers dip between her silky, inner lips until he found her tender opening. "Did I hurt you last night, Lilly? You were very tight around me."

She shook her head, too mindless already to speak. She spread her legs wider, encouraging his probing fingers to

perform their magic on her needy, throbbing flesh. He took the hint and gently slipped a finger inside her. His thumb found her clit and drew across the hardened nub, made slick from her juices and the silky-soft, mineralized water. To her surprise and utter delight, she climaxed immediately. Her inner muscles clamped down on his finger, holding it captive inside her while she quivered with pleasure.

Gabe continued to slowly pump his finger in and out of her squeezing core until the last, wonderful tremor washed through her body. He pulled out of her slowly, teasing the soft inner lips with gentle waves of his fingers through the water.

"God, you're incredible." He dropped his mouth down to hers.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her lips to him, inviting his tongue to dance and mate with hers. His taste was sweet and salty, wild and warm as the sun above. She squirmed in his lap until she could straddle him, not letting go of his kiss. His tongue thrust into the velvet depths of her mouth, his cock nudged against her vagina. With one swift downward stroke she impaled herself. It thrilled her, the way her body stretched to take all of him.

He grunted, the sound captured inside her mouth. Immediately she felt him harden, growing even thicker, rising up inside her core. It was the best form of torture she could ever imagine wanting. His hands settled on her hips, his fingers digging into her slick skin, pinning her there.

Groaning from the pleasure this position gave her, she started to arch and flex her hips, grinding harder onto his cock until it would go no further. She felt his broad head

bumping up against the mouth of her womb, tapping on a bundle of nerves that shocked her with its intensity. She went unexpectedly still.

"Don't stop now, sugar." His voice rasped across her lips, the sound raw and hungry.

"I won't," she panted. "Never, never stop."

Suddenly she felt too warm to be in such hot water with him. She flexed her hips again, barely sliding up his firm cock before sinking down on him. He helped her with the next thrust, raising her higher in the water until his length almost slipped out of her pussy. She came down on him harder, filling herself with his thick cock again and again. Their bodies made slapping noises in the water. Their groans of shared pleasure echoed against the stone walls of the hot spring.

Gabe's body tightened all over. His skin was slick and smooth under her hands. With a quick, hard thrust, he jerked his hips up one last time and buried the entire length of his thick, hungry erection deep inside her. Hot jets of semen pulsed out against that tingling bundle of nerves at the top of her womb. Lilly threw her head back and screamed through her second orgasm.

Many minutes later, when she could breathe normally again and open her eyes, she found him watching her. His gaze was languid now, sated and lazy. He was still inside her, filling her up with his wonderful thickness. His hands stroked up and down her spine, supporting her in the water.

"You're an amazing woman, Lilliana Wilcox."

Beads of sweat dotted his face. She lifted her hand and bathed his cheeks and forehead with water from her palm.

Evening Star  
*by Rita Sable*

"And you, Gabriel, are an amazing man."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gabe slowed the trip back to the ranch, for Lilly's sake. After two hours, she seemed to be desperately saddle sore and stubbornly unwilling to admit it. He could tell by the way she rode Dancer with a stiff posture, her mouth set in a grim, determined line. He swiveled in his saddle to face her one more time.

"Are you sure you don't want to stop and rest?"

She didn't answer him. Just shook her head and forced a smile from her clamped lips.

He was accustomed to being in the saddle all day long. As soon as they finished this trail down the mountain, he planned to scoop her from Dancer's back and set her into his lap. She would ride the rest of the way home that way, whether she wanted to or not. He respected her fortitude, but wasn't willing to put up with her pain.

When they finally exited the single-track trail, he turned Warrior about to face her.

"Lilly, come over here for a minute."

"What's wrong?" She guided Dancer over to him, a worried frown drawing creases between her golden-red eyebrows.

"Did we miss a turn up there?"

He buried the laughter rising up in his chest. She wouldn't appreciate the black humor he found in her situation right now, especially not with her face all tired and pale, her eyes wide with the despair of having to ride even longer.

He nudged Warrior with his heel, sending the stallion closer to Dancer. The mare, despite being Warrior's mother, flattened her ears at his approach. Lilly became wary and tightened her hands on the reins.

"Easy, girl. It's just me," he crooned. "I'm gonna..." In one swoop, he circled around Lilly's waist and picked her up out of her saddle. "...take her off your back."

Dancer trotted off without her rider, heading toward the edge of the pine forest where sweet grass grew beneath the trees.

"Hey!" Lilly squealed, grabbing onto his arm. "What'd you do that for? I can ride."

"I know you can. But you've had enough for one day. This will be more comfortable and take the pressure off your seat bones. Now settle down and stop squirming, or Warrior might just dump us both here."

Her smoky-blue eyes narrowed and she glared at him from her position across his thighs. She wiggled one more time to get comfortable between his body and the saddle horn, then sagged against his chest. Her weariness was palpable. He tucked her arm around his waist and wrapped his across her back, holding the reins in front.

"Better?" he grinned, admiring the flashing blue flame in her eyes.

"Yeah. Much." She clipped her words and then turned her attention to Dancer. "What about her?"

"Don't worry, she'll follow us home. She knows where her feed bin is. Horses are herd animals and want to stay together."

Gabe clucked to Warrior and guided him down to where Dancer grazed on the grass, heading into the forest path. True to his words, Dancer followed behind Warrior again, stopping now and then to grab mouthfuls of grass along the way and then trot to catch up. The pine forest was only an hour from the house. He suddenly wished it were much further, just so he could continue to cradle Lilly in his lap. Her soft hip pressed against his bulging cock, causing exquisite torture for him with every step Warrior took closer to home.

After her initial indignant posture, Lilly finally relaxed in his arms and leaned her head against his chest. She let him support her weight with his arm.

"So tell me something," she finally said after the long silence. "How did the ranch get its name? Is there a particular star in the night sky that hangs over it?"

"No. It's the English translation from our German family name. 'Abend' means evening, and 'stern' means star. My great-grandfather was a German immigrant, but we never spoke the language. Mom named the ranch after my parents first bought it as a vacation home, right after their wedding."

"Hmm," she mumbled against his chest, "quite a vacation home. So, after your mom died, did your dad stop coming to visit here?"

"No, on the contrary. They spent the last few weeks of her life here. Before she died, she requested cremation and for her ashes to be spread from the highest peak behind the house. We had a small ceremony on the southern ridge and each of us cast a handful of her ashes into the wind. Dad went into a deep depression after that. He wouldn't come out



of his room for two weeks. Megan and I could do nothing to console him. We figured he just needed time to accept Mom's death."

She sighed, long and slow. "That's so sad. He loved her very much. Your mom sounds like she was a wonderful woman, and strong enough to hold the love of a powerful man."

"She was. I miss her very much. She would have enjoyed meeting you, Lilly."

"Me too, I'm sure. How long did his depression last?"

"Oh, about six months or so. After the first four weeks, Dad's lawyers convinced me and my sister to take the company reins over for him, until he could again."

"And you did. But you never liked it? The power and excitement of running a multi-media corporation?"

He shook his head. "My life is here. I did it for him. Hated every minute of it. Megan actually has a stronger sense for that cutthroat business than I do. But she never wanted to have it for herself, either. We both knew that it was his life. He built it into what it is today and would return, after Mom's death."

"So, if your dad someday decided he didn't want to run the company anymore, or couldn't, what would happen to it?"

"Fortunately, that's already been decided. Megan and I would own the company fifty-fifty and the Board of Trustees would find and hire a CEO at that time to run it for us. Or, my dad has the option to sell the company outright and take all profits."

She grew quiet for a moment then murmured, "And which are you hoping for?"

He chuckled. "I'm hoping he sells it and enjoys the rest of his life playing eighteen holes of golf everyday on some warm spot of land, and spends as much time as he can with his grandchildren."

"Your sister is pregnant now, right? Judy, your dad's assistant, told me that. He'll have fun."

"Yeah," Gabe nodded. "He will. I'm looking forward to being an uncle too. Megan will be a great mother. Her husband, Scott, is a lucky man to have my sister as his wife."

She laughed. And then went still again, her expression serious. "What about you? Do you look forward to your own children some day?"

"Some day, yes. The right woman makes a man want to have children, with her. And you, Lilly? Thought about having children some day?"

"Yes," she barely whispered the word. "A woman's body doesn't let her *not* think about it. I was an only child. It was lonely. Until I was about ten, I always asked my mom for a sister or brother for Christmas, or for my birthday, thinking it was that easy for them to do. I envied the kids at school who had two or three siblings to play with."

"And tease and fight with? Sibling rivalry can be tough. Although, Megan was pretty easy going and didn't bug me too much while we were growing up. She learned the advantages of being nice to her big brother early."

She giggled and snuggled against him. He tightened his hold on her and dipped his head down to brush his lips across

her forehead. She turned her face up and met his lips with her own, wrapped her arm around his neck and moaned her need into his mouth. He dropped Warrior's reins, trusting the savvy stallion to continue on the way home without his guidance. He needed to fold both arms around Lilly and pull her as close as possible into his body and into his heart.

He sucked on her tongue, pulling it into his mouth and stroked it from top to bottom, from back to front. He plunged into the hot velvet of her mouth, tasted her soft inner cheeks and traced the arch of her teeth. She quivered in his arms, whimpering from the onslaught of his kiss. Finally, when his blood reached the boiling point and he could no longer tolerate the pain caused by the biting line of his zipper, he eased off her hungry mouth.

They were both breathing hard. She nipped at his lower lip. "Why'd you stop?"

"Because we're almost home now. And because you're killing me, sugar."

Her eyes darted between his, searching for his meaning. "How so?" Then she smiled, suddenly shifting from curious to omniscient in a flash. "Oh, that's how. I can do something about that."

When her fingers moved to his belt, he wrapped his hand over hers. "Oh, no you don't. As much as I appreciate the kindness you're offering, my horse will never forgive me or let me forget I came while riding him. Let's hold off on that 'til we get home."

\* \* \* \*

They arrived at the barn at sunset. Gabe led Warrior over to the water tank for a long, well-deserved drink. Lilly lay asleep in his arms. Lines of fatigue marked the pale skin around her eyes and mouth. As limber and toned as her body was from yoga, she wasn't used to all day activities like mountain riding.

"Lilly," he whispered into her ear, "wake up, love. We're home now."

She stirred, frowned drowsily, and blinked awake. "Already? Good. I'm hungry again."

"Me too. I'm gonna let you slide down from the saddle. Stand up."

Her body slithered out of his grasp and she stood on her own two feet again, albeit a bit wobbly at first. She grimaced. "Ouch. I think my legs are asleep."

Gabe dismounted and gathered up both Dancer's and Warrior's reins. "Why don't you go sit on the hay bales while I untack and feed the horses? Then we can heat up the left-over lobster dinner from Chang's. And go to bed."

"Mmm," she moaned. "Both sound yummy. I'll do that now, so we can eat as soon as you come inside."

"Okay, I'll be there real quick."

He made short work of taking care of his horses, not wanting to be separated from Lilly for more than a few precious minutes. His heart raced with his steps back to the house. Once inside, the aroma of Chang's special meal greeted him. Lilly was scooping the fragrant, savory dish onto plates when he walked into the kitchen. She smiled brightly when he came in.

"Dinner's ready, handsome."

"Thanks, beautiful." He gave her a cocky grin and went over to the sink to wash up.

She sucked in a quick breath when she sat down, gingerly, tipping from side to side to find a more comfortable position on the chair.

"Would you prefer to eat standing up? Or, we can take our meals upstairs and eat in bed."

"Ugh, I can't believe how much my butt hurts from sitting in a saddle. I think standing up might work better."

They took their plates over to the granite top kitchen island and ate at the corner, mutually quiet, enjoying their expertly prepared lobster and buckwheat noodle dinner. He finished before she did and helped himself to a second serving. She took her plate to the sink, rinsed it off and put it in the dishwasher. Then she came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her breasts into his back, her hips into his ass.

"Hurry, Gabe. I need you upstairs."

He pushed his plate away. "Already done. Let's go."

He took her hand and pulled her from the kitchen. She ran to keep up with him, their steps sounding loud in the quiet house as they hurried up to his bedroom. He already had his belt buckle undone and four buttons on his shirt open when she flew into his arms, pushing his fingers away.

"Let me," she said, her voice husky with need. "I love to undress you. It's like opening a gift on Christmas Day."

"Fair enough." He let her slip his shirt down his arms, and then he plucked at the hem of her long-sleeve t-shirt. She

lifted her arms up and he pulled it over her head. "God, I love that little pink cotton bra. Like cotton candy, I wanna eat you up, Lilly."

"Ooooh," she moaned. "Take off your jeans. It might be faster if we undress ourselves."

She struggled with the laces of her sneakers and almost toppled over before leaning a hip against the wall by the door. Her jeans came off after an impatient kick of one foot. All she had left was that almost-nothing cotton bra that showed more of her erect nipples than it hid and her matching pink cotton panties. The crotch was already dark and wet looking.

His cock burned to push past her warm, womanly flesh and bury deep inside her body. She slid out of her panties and released her bra clasp. His eyes feasted on the full, luscious globes of her breasts. The dark pink nipples puckered at him in an invitation to suckle. He trapped her against the wall with his body. Lilly's hands immediately reached out to grasp his throbbing cock.

"No way. Open your legs." He captured her hands inside his, brought them up to his mouth and kissed her knuckles before releasing them. "Put your hands around my neck."

She did, her eyes luminous and glossy with her own raging desire. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna fuck you right here against the wall, sugar. Hang on."

"Oh my God, oh yes." She closed her eyes and spread her legs wide to accept him into her body.

Her hot juices nearly seared the ultra sensitive skin of his cock when he slipped it between her pussy lips. He took time

to tease her, riding his length up and down her slit, pressing the root against her firm clit. She whimpered, biting her bottom lip until he thought she'd draw blood.

"Now, Gabe, now."

She didn't need to tell him twice. With hands on her hips he lifted her up and speared his cock into her tight, slick opening. Her legs wrapped around his waist, fusing them together.

"I won't last ... long," she panted against his ear. Her tongue flicked out and ran down the side of his neck.

His whole body rocked with immeasurable waves of bliss. With her back against the wall, he pinned her there and thrust his cock quickly in and out of her sweet, wet cunt. She gasped and moaned, loudly.

"I love it when you're noisy. Scream for me, sugar."

Her breath came in little gasps. Her nails dug into his shoulders and she tossed her head from side to side on the wall, sending her hair streaming wildly into her face. The walls of her vagina began to squeeze him tighter each time he drove inside her. She cried out her pleasure while her pussy clamped down all around his thrusting cock. The swell and flutter of her womb released fresh, creamy moisture to bathe him from head to root. With a grunt, he speared into her once more, harder, shouting his own release. He pumped every last drop of semen from his balls into her, until he felt empty and satisfied.

Lilly opened her eyes and smiled lazily. Strands of red-silk hair stuck to her lips. Her legs unfolded from his waist and,

reluctantly, he slid out of her, letting her feet touch the ground again.

"That was wild." Her voice came out in a lazy purr. "I don't care how you learned to do that, I'm just glad you did."

"Good, 'cuz it was pure instinct. I've never fucked a woman against the wall before."

"Really?" Her smile widened. "Cool. Now take me to bed, cowboy."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A soft noise stirred Gabe from a deep, satisfying sleep. He opened bleary eyes to the early gray light of dawn filtered through the curtains of his bedroom windows. In his arms he cradled the delicious, soft warmth of Lilly's naked body. She slept, curled up on her side with her knees drawn up. The smell of sex saturated the air, reminding him of the incredible night of lovemaking they'd shared.

He smiled. Waking up now with the soft globes of her ass pressed against his cock was his idea of heaven on earth. He stirred, feeling himself wedge tighter into the warm, tempting valley between her nether cheeks.

There was that soft noise again. He lifted his head off the pillow and turned to the opened door of his bedroom.

His father stood in the doorway with his hands jammed into the pockets of a red and black striped robe, belted tight across his lean hips. His thick silver hair was mussed, as if he'd just gotten out of his own bed. Their eyes locked. He crooked a silent finger at Gabe, and then pointed downstairs. He walked away from the doorway on silent feet.

The message was quite clear. Gabe kissed Lilly's exposed shoulder before sliding out of bed, making sure to tuck the quilt around her body. He grabbed his jeans from last night and tugged them back on. Then closed the door behind him so that Lilly would be undisturbed. After having a little discussion with his dad, he planned to crawl into bed with her

again and put his cock right back between the sweet cheeks of her ass.

Downstairs, Gabe walked to his office, where he knew his dad would be waiting for him. George sat in one of the leather chairs in front of the desk, his legs crossed casually at the ankles, his feet bare. He sipped from a cup of steaming coffee and raised his eyebrows when Gabe strolled in.

"Dad. You're lookin' well."

"Morning, son. Help yourself," he nodded at the coffeepot on the desk. "I brought in the whole pot. Figured you'd need it this morning."

Gabe grinned. "Actually, I feel quite refreshed. When did you get here?"

"Last night. Right after you and Miss Wilcox finished your, um, dinner."

Gabe winced. "Saw that, did you?"

His father whistled across his coffee cup, carefully keeping his eyes averted. "Heard it. Son, you gotta learn to close your bedroom door. Where are Marta and Carlo?"

"At the stadium hotel. They went out a couple days early to make sure the stalls and box seats are set up. They'll be back around noon today, before we load everything up and pull out for the weekend. How long are you staying?"

"Until Sunday. Wouldn't want to miss seeing you defend your title in the cutting arena."

"Til Sunday? So, you'll stick around for the dance? Great!"

Gabe poured himself a mug of coffee and settled into the chair behind his desk, propping his feet up on the corner.

"Sure," George nodded. "I missed attending the Cattleman's Ball every year. I figured it was time now, to start doing the things I enjoyed doing back when your mother was with me. But that's not why I'm here, son."

"No?" Gabe feigned indifference. That bitter taste in his mouth returned after the unpleasant reminder of the episode last week in New York.

"What happened between you and Amanda? I found out yesterday when Paul Pierce called, expecting me to give him an explanation. Seems his daughter won't say a word to him."

"Just yesterday? Shit. I broke off our engagement a week ago. She just now told her old man about it?" Gabe blew out his anger in a long breath.

"A week ago? Paul didn't know until yesterday. You could have told me! Amanda is apparently heart-broken about it. What happened, Gabe?"

Gabe set his coffee mug down on the desk and ran his hands through his hair. "I hired Steve Meredith to tail her. After a couple days on the job, he landed some proof for what I had suspicions about. I showed her the photos. She barely blinked."

His father was silent for several agonizing minutes. George reached over and poured more coffee into his mug, and then leaned back with a heavy sigh. "I knew, son."

"Knew what?"

"That she was still with him. I saw her coming out of the elevator at the Astoria. I happened to be there for a meeting with one of my actors. It was only eight a.m. That got me

thinking. I didn't want you to get hurt. Are you, Gabe? Is this why Ms. Wilcox is in your bed now?"

"No." Gabe sat up straight in his chair. "Leave Lilly out of this. She's got nothing to do with what happened between Amanda and me."

George's throaty chuckle sounded loud inside the office. Gabe glanced out past the doors, hoping the sound wouldn't carry upstairs and wake Lilly.

"I don't think I've ever heard you sound so defensive over a woman, son. Why is that, do you think?"

He glowered at his dad, grabbed his mug and swallowed the remaining coffee, welcoming the searing heat down his throat. "None of your business. Lilly's nothing like Amanda. She's honest."

"Honest. Hmm. A good quality to have, if it's true. And how would you know that she's not after your assets, the obvious ones aside."

"The *obvious ones* are the only ones I've given her so far. She's not like Amanda, Dad. I know her."

"How?" His father demanded, louder than Gabe would have liked. George softened his voice before speaking again. "Make damn certain, son, that you don't get your dick caught in the grinder. Or your heart."

Gabe chuckled, shaking his head. "Dad, I've had her investigated. Just like you did, I'm sure, before sending her on this job to paint the ranch."

"You had her investigated? By Steve?"

"Yeah. Only I went a little deeper. I had to know some things about Lilly that didn't quite add up. I know everything about her now."

\* \* \* \*

Lilly woke up, instantly aware that the secure warmth of Gabe's hard body was missing. She yawned and stretched under the quilt, feeling the tightness between her thighs. A tightness not associated with the long day in the saddle.

Wow. She was actually sore from his vigorous lovemaking. After the rock-hard fuck against the wall, he took her again on the bed with incredible gentleness. How thrilling to feel him moving inside her body, filling her with his huge cock. He knew how to pump his hips, drilling into her core so that his pubic ridge stimulated her clit, sending her whole body into tremors of ecstasy.

She grinned up at the ceiling over his bed. Her nipples still felt tender and swollen from his mouth. And there was a delicious tingle building inside her pussy again.

*So, where'd he go?*

Lilly got out of his bed and found his bathrobe. She rolled up the sleeves and belted it, enjoying the smell of him in the fluffy fabric that surrounded her body. Inside the hallway, she heard his voice downstairs. Was he on the phone? She tiptoed downstairs, hoping to surprise him. Wouldn't it be fun to sit naked on his lap while he did business on the phone?

*Who was he speaking to? Was someone else in there with him? It sounded kind of like...*

"You had her investigated? By Steve?"

"Yeah, Dad. Only I went a little deeper. I had to know some things about Lilly that didn't quite add up. I know everything about her now."

*Dad? His dad? George was here?*

"Everything? So, you know about her hospital stay? And why?"

"She killed that fucker in self defense. The state appointed her a psychiatrist for recuperative counseling. I've spoken with her doctor, I had to."

Lilly's heart thundered inside her chest. A band tightened around her lungs and squeezed with such force, she thought she'd pass out. She stood frozen to the spot with one hand braced against the wall for support, unable to make her presence to them known, unable to walk away.

"And the doctor agreed to speak with you about her patient? I can't believe it."

"Yes she did, but not until she probed my psyche to a painful degree. If it weren't for her doctor, I wouldn't have that beautiful woman upstairs in my bed."

"I see. And how long will she be there? I came to see my painting too, she must be almost finished with it by now."

"It's not yours. It's not leaving here."

"That beautiful, huh?"

"Yes. And they're both mine. She's not leaving either."

"Ah, now this is getting interesting, son. Does Ms. Wilcox know this, or have you just now learned about it yourself? You know, after last night?"

"No, Dad. I've known for some time. I just need to work on her a bit more, but I think she'll agree. There's nothing for her in New York."

"Gabe, let me give you a piece of advice. You mess this one up, and you'll never find the woman of your dreams anywhere else. I can see it in you, the burning, and the compulsion to have her all the time. It doesn't go away, does it? Am I right?"

Silence. A coffee mug slid across the desk, making a shallow scraping sound. Lilly still held her breath.

"Yeah, I want her all the time. I have for a long time. Since the first time I met her."

"Son, listen to what I'm going to tell you now. That's how I found her. I tracked her down and found her at the art gallery. Roger Hughes recognized her picture in the magazine article, as the woman you were looking for that night. The one who'd disappeared. I knew it then. She was the woman who made you so fuckin' miserable for so long, even after you asked Amanda to marry you."

"Shit!"

"Gabe," his father's voice roared above Gabe's swearing. "I've sent you a gift. Don't fuck this one up. You break her heart, and I'll make sure she's taken care of for the rest of her life. She's a talented artist. And with a few contacts from me, she'll go far. Without you."

Lilly slipped back upstairs like a wraith, not caring if they heard her leaving this spot by the office doors or not. Their conversation continued but she didn't care what else they said. Her heart felt like a butcher's cleaver had split it in two.

She closed her bedroom door ... and turned the lock. It was the first time she'd done that in this house, never feeling that she needed to until now. She let his robe fall to the floor, not caring to have his scent wrapped around her any more. Inside the bathroom she turned on the shower. The sound would mask the torrents of tears she felt gathering behind her eyes and the overdue gasps from her lungs. She locked the bathroom door too. Then she sank against the wall down to the floor, between the sink and shower, and let the carefully contained tremors take over her body and spill from her soul.

He'd lied to her. Both of them had! George ... no, *Mr. Abendstern*, she wouldn't call him by his given name anymore. Mr. Abendstern didn't care about her art. That was merely a ruse to get her out here. He set her up like bait on a hook and dangled her in front of his son's nose. And Gabe had bitten. Hook, line and sinker—he had her. Even worse ... she let him have her—she came willingly to his bed.

*Ruthless bastard!* How on earth did he get her private information? Wasn't that confidential? He had no right to dig into her past this deeply without her consent. She had the right to tell him exactly what she wanted him to know about her past—and nothing more!

Lilly felt violated all over again. Her heart ached from it, from the incredible pain of betrayal. This was almost as bad as what Craig had done to her. That pain had been physical. This pain hurt from the inside, out.

After her cry, a good long one, Lilly showered and dressed. A plan had formed inside her head once she'd cleared it of the initial shock and pain.



Evening Star  
*by Rita Sable*

It was over between her and Gabe.

No more sweet talk. No more sex. Everything between them would be business from now on. He'd done his job—he'd healed her good and proper. That was all she needed him for. Last night was enough to realize again that she was a woman, capable of experiencing sexual gratification. And now he wanted to control her—just like Craig had done. She wouldn't allow it. There would be no remorse. She pulled the shields up tight around her heart.

She had a job to do. Starting now, that's all she would focus on.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Gabe held the rear passenger side door of his truck open for Lilly. She fiddled with her backpack and counted the rolls of film she had in there.

"Lilly?" His voice sounded edgy as she walked by him.

She gave him an annoyed look. "What?"

His father slouched in the front passenger seat, his eyes flashing with a perverse humor she didn't understand. All morning she'd managed to avoid talking to Gabe. When she came downstairs for breakfast, she greeted Mr. Abendstern with respect, but moved away from Gabe when he tried to kiss her good morning. His dark scowl now fired up the light in the old man's eyes.

"Get in." Gabe motioned. "We're ready to leave."

She looked behind the truck with the long, gooseneck horse trailer attached to where Marta and Carlo climbed into a second truck. "I'll ride with them. You two have a lot to catch up on, I'm sure."

"Lilly." His voice held a warning edge.

"Go ahead, we'll be following."

She jogged back to the second truck and scooted in beside Marta, pointedly ignoring the woman's wide-eyed look.

"You don't want to ride with Gabe and his father?"

"Nope. They have things to talk about. I don't want to interfere."

"Gabe is cranky today. I wonder why?"

Lilly slammed the door shut. "I have no idea. But I'm staying out of his way."

\* \* \* \*

The rodeo grounds reminded Lilly of the State Fair in Ohio. Attending it each year as a young child with her parents was always the highlight of the end of summer. The crowds, the noise, the wonderful smells of different food vendors, the tinkling music of carnival rides, and barns filled row after row with beautiful animals.

She took a deep, satisfying breath of air. Somewhere nearby, there was a vendor with her favorite fair treat. Fresh, hot cinnamon almonds.

The designated Evening Star Ranch stall area bustled with activity. Connor, Hank and Joe were busy leading each horse from the trailer into a stall. They threw down sawdust, filled hay bags and water buckets. She understood now what Gabe had meant when he said Marta and Carlo came down a day early to set up. The place had been curtained off from the other stalls, decorated with midnight blue satin and crystal stars. The Evening Star Ranch logo, with its trademark five-pointed star and the letters ES inside the star, hung from each stall nameplate. One stall had been set up as a television/VCR room, with carpeting, chairs and racks of trophies on the walls. Marta and Carlo worked together to set up a display table in that area, loaded with glossy photos. Another empty stall was reserved as an open bar. She glanced inside, quite surprised to see a bartender stocking liquors on a mirrored shelf.

Apparently, they would be hosting a party in this barn. Gabe and his father stood off to the side near the trucks, talking animatedly to a well-dressed older couple. Mr. Abendstern looked quite handsome in his jeans, cowboy boots and blue and white striped shirt. Not at all like the high-powered businessman from New York. Clearly, he felt as comfortable here as he did in his mile-high offices.

Lilly backed away, following the tantalizing scent of cinnamon almonds. Out of the relatively quiet area of the horse barns, she found the thriving center of the fair with all the food, merchants with clothing and hand-made jewelry for sale, games of skill, and the giant Ferris wheel that stood so tall, it could be seen from the highway. People thronged here, waiting in lines for food, or just standing in groups. Children darted in and out of the adults, playing games of tag and chase. In the corners, teenagers huddled in groups with boys to one side, girls on the other, nervously trying to decide which ride to go on next and who to pair up with.

Laughter floated around Lilly. She sighed. It felt good not to have to pretend she didn't hurt anymore. She found the vendor with the candy almonds and bought a small bag to munch on, then settled on an empty bench to people watch. Sitting and thinking about her plight wasn't what she wanted to do right now. Nonetheless, the thoughts intruded.

She had to find a better reason to avoid Gabe. Clearly, he suspected things weren't right between them. He had no idea she'd overheard his conversation with his father. The puzzled frowns he gave her showed his frustration with her sudden

distance. After last night she knew he expected some sort of affection.

God, how she wanted so much to give it to him!

The raw ache around her heart hadn't eased much. If anyone asked her what was wrong right now, she felt like she'd start crying again. Fortunately, everyone had been too busy with packing and loading up the horses to notice her broken heart.

Gabe would find her, soon. He would corner her and ask her why she gave him the cold shoulder now, after they'd had such great sex.

That was it. *Just great sex.*

When he asked, she'd tell him that. And walk away. They weren't married, or engaged, or even dating. It was just great sex. He had no ties to her heart, or her life.

She ate the whole bag of cinnamon almonds while she muddled through the inevitable scenario with Gabe. She dusted off her fingertips and noticed a man standing off to the side. He lounged against the open bar rail of the beer vendor. The casual, nonchalant attitude of his lithe body belied the intensity with which he watched her. He tipped his hat up when her eyes met his. She smiled shyly and stood up to leave. He pushed away from the bar and walked over.

Snug jeans hugged long, lean legs. A huge silver belt buckle crowned his flat stomach, and the dark red of his suede shirt would have been called 'oxblood' in her palette of paints. She tried to dart past when he caught her arm.

"Hey now, don't run away. I just wanted to introduce myself."

Lilly turned to face him. He was quite handsome, not much taller than she was, with dark almost black hair and eyes the color of a stormy sea.

"I'm James Boyd. Jimmy, to my friends and all the ladies." He stuck out his hand. Lilly felt inclined to shake it quickly, but he didn't let her hand go so soon.

"Nice to meet you, Jimmy. I'm Lilliana Wilcox. My friends call me Lilly."

"Lilly. Very nice to meet a pretty lady like you at this rodeo. I'm sorry if I made you nervous over there."

She glanced over at the bar where he'd been standing. "Oh, that's okay, I guess. But I should get back to my friends now. They're probably wondering where I've gone off to."

He placed his hand on the small of her back. She jerked at the unfamiliar touch, at the heat of his hand through the silky fabric of her blouse. "Why don't I walk you back there? Wouldn't want you to get lost, since I don't think you've been here before."

"I haven't. But I think I can find my way back to the barn."

His charming smile showed perfect white teeth. "I insist. Besides, it'll give us a chance to get acquainted. Where're you from?"

"New York." What harm was there in being friendly with a good-looking man? She had no attachments, right?

"You don't look like a New Yorker. This your first time to the rodeo?"

"Yes. It's a lot bigger and more crowded than I expected."

Jimmy guided her through the crowd, all the while maintaining that confident hand on her back. He seemed

perfectly cordial, and very polite. She began to relax into their conversation.

"The rodeo gets bigger and bigger every year. Granite Springs has a population of about thirty thousand people. But during rodeo week, it swells to over a hundred thousand. You can't find a hotel room for miles."

"Really? Well, then I guess I'm glad we got some rooms for the weekend. Although, the ranch isn't too far from here if we had to commute back and forth."

"Your friends are entered in the rodeo events?"

"Yes, several."

"Most people tend to camp on the grounds or stay at the hotel across the road if they have livestock boarded. It's easier. Which ranch did you say your friends are from?"

"I didn't say," she laughed. "Are you from around here?"

"Sure am. My family owns the Boyd Ranch, north of the Powhattan River. Guess you could say I'm a local boy."

Lilly turned to head into the barn she remembered coming out of. More people arrived with trailers and unloaded more beautiful horses into stalls. Inside the barn, stalls had been filled with horses. People crowded the aisles and hurried to transform their stalls with elaborate decorations. By now, she figured it was some sort of tradition.

Jimmy dipped his head and nodded greetings to many of the people they passed in the barn aisle. Obviously, he was a popular local boy. Two cowgirls, dressed in tight jeans and equally tight t-shirts, sat in director chairs at the end of one aisle. Jimmy's smile widened upon seeing them, but he kept his hand on Lilly's back and walked past them, tipping his hat.

"Afternoon, ladies," he drawled smoothly.

The women grinned up at him as if he were a chocolate-dipped cherry dangled in front of their lips.

"Hey there, Jimmy," they crooned.

They ignored Lilly. "You know most of these people?"

He winked at her. "Like I said, I'm a local boy. I've been coming to this rodeo since I could walk. So, let me ask you something, Lilly. Are you sticking around for the Cattleman's Ball on Saturday night? 'Cuz if you are, I'd sure like to garner a dance or two with you."

"Oh. Yes, I guess I'm going." *Imagine the look on Gabe's face if you dance with another man!* "I'll save you a dance."

She turned the corner of one aisle and looked down it, recognizing the Evening Star Ranch logo and trademark blue color amidst the new arrivals and their decorations. "There's my group. Thanks for walking me back."

Jimmy's eyes narrowed for one second, emotion swirled in the stormy green color. His smile widened. "I know them," he nodded down the aisle. "It was really nice to meet you, Lilly. I look forward to seeing you around here the next couple days."

He took her hand and kissed it, keeping his gaze focused on her.

"Thanks, Jimmy. Guess I'm not used to this cowboy way you all have." She pulled her hand back. A blush stole across her face, burning into her ears and cheeks.

He tipped his hat again. "Remember to save me a dance, or two. Bye now."

"Bye," she waved and watched him walk away.



His walk was strong and confident, almost cocky. She liked the way his jeans shaped his small butt, and the way his angular shoulders shifted when he walked.

Could she use him to get back at Gabe?

The idea shocked her. She was never the conniving kind of woman who did those kinds of things! *Maybe that's why you're always getting your heart ripped out?*

She turned from watching Jimmy Boyd disappear into the crowd of people and horses, and ran right into a solid wall of muscle. Strong hands caught her reflexive jump backwards.

"Gabe!" she yelped. She tugged on her shoulders to loosen his grip. "What are you doing, trying to scare me to death?"

"I've been looking for you. Where've you been for the last hour?"

Lilly was acutely aware of other people walking by, their glances curious and surprised. "None of your business. What do you want? I'm busy."

His eyes flared with barely suppressed heat and he ground his jaw so that the muscle in his temple jumped up and down. She recognized his temper by now. He put his arm around her shoulder and turned her down the aisle.

"Come with me. We need to talk."

She tried to loosen his arm from around her shoulders, but he clamped it tighter. Her own temper began to flare. He had no right to manhandle her, or drag her with him anywhere. She wanted to struggle against his urging, but didn't want to cause a scene with so many people watching either. She bit her lip and stubbornly allowed him to guide her through the aisles, past the Evening Star Ranch stalls.

Carlo and Mr. Abendstern turned from their conversation when Gabe hustled her past them. Both had expressions of wonder on their faces too. She refused to look at either man. Gabe turned her down the aisle, past the bathrooms and then gave her a small push inside an empty office area. He kicked the door shut with his foot, went over to the window overlooking the busy barn area, and slammed the blinds down.

"Now," he leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "Tell me what's going on with you?"

Lilly dropped her small backpack onto a table and blew out a long, hot breath of air. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Lilly." He scrubbed one hand across his mouth before speaking again. "I thought we had an understanding between us now. I thought you trusted me. I don't understand why you're pulling away from me again. Or why you're talking to James Boyd."

"Ah ha," she pointed a finger at him. "You know him, and you're jealous."

"Yeah, I do know him." Gabe's eyes narrowed to pinpoints of black. "Sugar, you stay away from James Boyd. You're messin' with fire where he's concerned. Don't do it, for whatever reason that you're angry with me."

"Don't tell me who I can and can't talk to. What gives you that right? You're not my husband, fiance, or boyfriend! We had a couple of good fucks. And that's all it was, nothing more."

He pushed away from the wall and started toward her. She stepped behind the table and kept the distance between them.

"What happened, Lilly? You know that was more than just sex. You're not the kind of girl who does one-night stands."

"How do you know that?" She shrieked, then forced calm back into her voice. "You don't know anything about me, Gabe. Not the *real me*."

He followed her around the table, dragging his hand along the wood, keeping his eyes on her. "I think I know what this is all about. Were you listening to my conversation with my dad this morning? Did you eavesdrop and hear things you shouldn't have heard?"

Lilly twisted to face him, shock and anger and fear all bunched up into one painful lump in her throat. Just as fast, she turned her face away and stepped around the table again.

"Did you, Lilly?"

Everything she'd felt then rushed back into her heart with such force, it felt like a physical blow to her chest. She turned to the wall, refusing to look at him.

"Shit," he swore in a hiss of breath. "I knew it. God damn it."

She shook her head, slowly back and forth as if it were a pendulum on her neck. "You shouldn't have done that. You had no right, no right to dig as far as you did. And I don't think I can forgive you."

"Lilly. Oh God, I'm sorry. I had to know how to help you, how to get close to you. Don't you understand that? I would never do that if I didn't care so much."

"Don't!" She held up her hand to stop him. "You bastard! Don't you dare give me that load of crap now. What you did went beyond normal consideration, straight into the realm of obsessive control freak. At least your father told me he looked into my background. He had a valid reason, since he hired me. But you! What gave you the right? I won't be controlled again, Gabe. It's over. Whatever you thought had begun between us ... it's over."

"Sugar, please let me explain..."

"No! Stop it, just stop. I'm not listening to any more of your sweet talk. I have a job to do. I'm going to do it. And when I'm done, I'm leaving. Despite what *you* think, I do have a life in New York, and I *am* keeping it. You and your dad can go on about your merry lifestyle of the rich and famous and stick your noses somewhere else. I don't need his help either. I'm done with both of you."

"Lilly, I'm not trying to control you."

She turned to him then, letting all the hurt and anger she felt show in her face, not caring to hide it from him now. Angry tears drew hot paths down her cheeks. "Funny. I've heard those words before, right before I ended up in the emergency room the first time. I don't believe you. You made plans for my future without even asking me what mine were. Do you have any idea how pompous and arrogant that is?"

Cold restraint masked the fury on his face, and vibrated like a taut cord in the stiffness of his body. "No, but I'm beginning to understand it now. I didn't do it with the intent of hurting you, Lilly. You know that. I really do care for you."

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She closed her eyes, letting the wetness slip down her cheeks unheeded. "Good. If the pain you feel is anything like mine, you'll understand why I'll never be yours."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gabe knew the carefully controlled smile on Lilly's face was for Marta's benefit. She took her room key from Marta, gave her a quick hug and walked down the hotel hallway alone, swinging her backpack from side to side.

His heart thumped with an ache he never knew he could experience. He wanted to run after her, capture her and crush her with kisses while he begged for forgiveness.

"Is she coming to dinner with us?" His dad also followed Lilly's progress down the long hall.

"I doubt it. She wants space. Time alone. That sort of nonsense." He sat with his dad and Carlo at a table in the hotel lobby bar, with a clear view of the hall leading down to their suite of rooms. His room was connected to Lilly's, but he doubted if she'd open her side tonight.

He tossed down his whiskey. Where was the damned waiter? He needed more than one measly little shot right now.

Marta rejoined them. Sadness darkened her eyes and flattened her mouth. "I don't know what is wrong with the Senorita. She says she has a headache and wants to go to bed early. But it is not her head that is hurting."

The pointed look she gave him rankled. "Don't look at me. I tried talking to her. She doesn't want to listen to anything more I have to say."

"Maybe it's the way you said it? You have to be very careful with a young woman's heart." Carlo spoke across the bottle of his beer.

"Si," Marta readily agreed. "You can't just tell her how it's going to be and expect her to follow you like a puppy. She's a modern woman."

"A strong woman. Feisty. Independent. So damned beautiful it breaks your heart. Right, son?"

Gabe glared at his dad and swirled the two ice cubes around in his empty glass. "Who are you to talk? You did the same thing I did."

His dad sighed, the sound heavy and tired. "I didn't go as far as you did. More importantly, I told her I looked into her background."

"She forgives you because you hired her to make a painting. All I want to do is marry her."

Marta sniffled. Carlo patted the back of her hand clasped inside his. "Hmm," he grunted. "So you proposed already?"

"Not exactly. She's still afraid."

Carlo squinted at him, reminding him of the way he used to do when Gabe was still a kid. "What is it that frightens her about that?"

The waiter finally appeared with a fresh glass of whiskey. "Bring me another," Gabe said, trying to ignore Carlo's questioning. "On second thought, just bring me the goddamned bottle."

The waiter took off again after a quick "Yessir!"

"Well?" asked his dad. "Answer the question. What's she so afraid of?"

"Control. She's afraid I want to control her life."

"Oh." The three of them moaned in unison.

"What? I am *not* a control freak."

"Yes, you are." Again, they spoke as one.

"Shit." He swallowed his whiskey and slammed the thick glass down on the table. After a moment of silence around their table, he gave in. "Alright, alright. So I like to maintain order and discipline in my life. Nothing wrong with that, is there? It doesn't mean I'm trying to control her life, does it?"

His dad swiped the newly arrived whiskey bottle out of his reach. "Why don't you ask her that?"

Gabe settled back in his chair, feeling defeated and morose. "Not yet. She's still too hurt to listen to anything, not even reason. If I go to her now, she'll back away even further. I'll give her the space she wants until she figures it out."

\* \* \* \*

The preliminary round of the cutting event had ended. Overhead, the announcer's voice bellowed through the arena speakers, letting everyone know which horse and rider teams made the grade. Jimmy Boyd's name was announced first. An unexpected thrill raced through Lilly's blood when she heard both Gabe and Carlo moved into the final rounds. Groups of people cheered and shouted, standing up from their chairs when favorites were named, briefly drowning out the announcer's voice inside the crowded arena. Marta and George lent their voices to the noisy crowd. Lilly clapped, but tamped down the urge to squeal with her own excitement.



*Dammit!* Did the man have to be so outrageously handsome on top of that horse? Was Gabe trying to attract the attention of every woman in the arena?

It sure seemed that way. Women of all ages flocked to him in the barn and in the waiting area of the arena down below. He was charming when he talked to them, beyond handsome with that sexy half smile and those twinkling eyes. And they touched him ... soft, questing fingers and hands on his arms, his chest, all of them seeking his attention.

They did the same thing to Jimmy Boyd. Why didn't the flicker of awareness bother her then?

All day Gabe had avoided her. She kept her distance too, but it sure seemed as if he'd suddenly lost interest in her. He'd taken her words to heart and accepted what she'd said—that it was over between them.

Her gut twisted into another painful knot. Everywhere she looked, she saw him, but he never glanced her way. She wasn't trying to get his attention. Why should it bother her now? Isn't this what she wanted?

*No.* The answer stabbed at her bruised heart. *No, you don't!*

He betrayed me. He took information that was private.

*You would have told him sooner or later, all the sordid details.*

He had no right to do that! He violated my privacy.

*Why would he waste his time if he didn't care? He does care. You know it.*

I'm not ready to forgive him. Maybe never ready for that!

The little feuding voices inside her head pounded a painful tempo along the edge of her temples. She needed to get up and walk. Sitting between Marta and George made her only too aware of their obvious concerned glances. They hadn't said anything to her about her argument with Gabe, but she damn well knew he talked to them about it. It seemed that nothing was sacred or private in this family.

She stood up and reached for her camera bag.

George immediately turned to her. "Lilly, is everything okay?"

*If one more person asks me if everything is 'okay', I'll scream!*

Turning, she smiled down at him. "Yes, fine. I need to get up and walk a bit. How long until the final event starts?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Marta moved to get up, but George's hand on her arm stopped her from rising.

"No," he stared Marta down before turning his eyes back to Lilly. "Hurry back, hon'."

Lilly hid her frown with another forced smile. "I will."

She trotted down the stairs, deftly avoiding people carrying overloaded trays of drinks and food up to their seats. On the ground level, she turned toward the waiting area beneath the arena where cowboys and their horses passed the time in nervous anticipation of the finals to start. The steers that were used for the cutting preliminary event huddled together in a penned off area, blowing hard from their recent exertion in the arena. Two cowboys on horseback herded six new steers into the arena from outside. She

flattened herself against the wall as they rushed past her through the aisle.

Without warning she was hauled up in the air, away from the cattle, landing sideways across a hard lap and the even harder horn of a saddle.

"Trying to get yourself squashed, pretty lady?"

She grabbed his arm for balance. "Jimmy! My God, you scared me to death."

"You shouldn't be down here. Those steers don't care if you get in the way." His sweet smile turned suggestive. "Not that I mind. Did you come lookin' for me?"

"Uh, sure." Her camera bag slipped off her shoulder and she squirmed to save it while his horse danced nervously beneath them. "Thanks. I didn't know they were coming through. You can put me down now."

Jimmy shook his head. "Naw, why would I want to do that just yet? I need a kiss, for good luck in the final round."

She stiffened, aware now of his erection pressing against her hip. "Ah, I..."

He didn't wait for her to finish. His mouth came down on hers—warm, wet, urgent and demanding. She clamped her lips against his tongue and pushed at his chest to stop him, with enough force to throw herself from his lap. His arm circled around her waist, steadying her position between his legs. He squeezed her tighter into his crotch.

"Now, that wasn't a proper kiss," he admonished her. His smile returned with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Wait for me here. After I win the event I want a real kiss ... to celebrate."

Looking past Jimmy, she saw Gabe standing at the end of the aisle. He leaned a hip against the wall and watched them. Even from the distance the intensity of his gaze burned right into her soul. She balked at the sudden urge to run to him.

She ignored him and turned back to Jimmy with a bright smile. "Sure. I'll wait for you."

Jimmy let her slide from the saddle, his hands rubbing up from her hips across her breasts until her feet were on the ground. She pushed his hands away as soon as she could.

"Wish me luck, sweetheart. I'll be back real soon to collect."

"Good luck."

Lilly watched him trot off to warm up his horse inside the arena. When she chanced a glance behind her, Gabe had disappeared from the aisle. She turned around quickly, not wanting to know where he went, or what he did after having witnessed the way Jimmy Boyd kissed her.

Served him right. That should make Gabe understand she didn't belong to him.

The arena announcer's voice boomed through the speakers, sounding even louder in the enclosed aisle area.

"Take your seats, everyone. We'll begin the final cutting event in two minutes. Jimmy Boyd's up front, aboard his ten-year-old Quarter Horse cutter, Little Lena's Buckeye. Jimmy needs a clean round to take the top placing over last year's champ, Gabriel Abendstern on Warrior."

Goose bumps pimpled the skin on Lilly's arms at the mention of Gabe's name. She shivered, renewing her determination not to react so easily. She moved over to the

waiting area where she had a clear view of the arena from ground level. A small group of women she recognized earlier as those hanging on Gabe and Jimmy crowded in, along with the cowboys working the gate for each competitor. She stepped up to the gate and positioned herself right in the center, hooked her arms over the top and focused her camera beyond the nervous, twitching steers inside the arena. Jimmy walked his big sorrel horse back and forth in front of the small herd, waiting for the start clock.

He stopped his horse in the center, staring down the steers. The cattle froze, as if they knew that any second now, one of them would be singled out and separated from the others.

The arena clock buzzed his start time, startling her with the jarring sound. The horse took one step forward and the herd moved as one, away from the horse. The horse darted in front of it, pinning one steer at the side of the herd and splitting it away from the rest. The lone steer was left to dance with the horse.

Back and forth, the steer attempted to gain access back to its herd mates. Jimmy's horse swayed and zipped from side to side, front legs splayed wide and jerking with the quick reflexes of a striking snake.

Lilly's camera zoomed in. She captured the motion and the beauty of the dance. Her flash and the flashes of hundreds of other cameras lent a tense, sparkling air to the cheering crowd. The longer the calf was held at bay in front of the horse, the louder the crowd screamed.

With a spin on a hind leg the calf was suddenly free and fled back to the others. Jimmy pulled his horse up, a look of disbelief and anger riding his face. The crowd went silent. The clock still ticked away the precious few seconds he had remaining to hold that steer.

She looked up from her view in the camera, not really understanding at first what had happened. Voices surrounded her now, hushed and stunned.

"Oh no! It broke away from him," exclaimed one woman.

Another woman moaned loudly. "I can't believe he couldn't hold it. He's gone. Out."

"Look at his face! He knows he's lost the top slot now."

The arena announcer's voice joined them, much louder. "Well, that was an unexpected upset for hometown boy, Jimmy Boyd. With only four seconds remaining on the clock, he lost his cut. Ladies and gentleman, let's give a big hand to him as he exits the arena!"

Clapping and cheering drowned out the announcer's last words. The cowboys working the gate motioned for Lilly and the others standing there to move aside for Jimmy to come through with his horse.

He trotted past without looking at anyone, his mouth set in a grim line. Clearly upset and fuming about his mistake, she didn't think now would be a good time to follow him and offer condolences. He wouldn't want that congratulatory kiss now.

"Oh, here's comes Gabriel." One of the women whispered to her friends.

The other moaned suggestively. "Come to mama, dreamboat."

Lilly turned her head, straining to hear their conversation more clearly. So, they had crushes on cutting cowboys? Obviously from the way they panted and hung on each one, they didn't have favorites.

"Ha! You wish he'd come to you." The third woman laughed at her moaning friend.

"He's single again," the moaner declared. "I heard he broke his engagement to that New York girl. And I'm going to the ball. That hunk of man is dancing with me this year."

"Oh yeah? Well, Miss Hot To Trot, I heard he's got a new girlfriend already. Mr. Murphy told my mama that he saw them together. How are you expecting to lure him away?"

Gabe trotted past into the arena on his spotted stallion. He had that devilish smile on his face until he spied Lilly standing with the group of women near the gate. His eyes pinned on her for a split second, the look he gave her full of heat and longing, before tearing his gaze away and giving them all a tip from his hat.

"Oh, did you see that?" The moaner jostled her girlfriends. "He looked right at me."

"Honey, he looked at all of us."

"You won't be saying that after the dance. Wait 'til he sees me in my new ball gown. It's cut real low, he'll be drooling after I'm done with him."

The other two women shared a giggle at their friend's expense. "Well, just be sure you don't end up tripping over your own boobs when they fall out."

"I won't have to," the moaner assured them. "'Cuz he'll be holding them up for me."

The three women broke into hysterical laughter then, loud enough for other people to glance at them curiously.

Lilly had heard enough. More than likely he *would* enjoy dancing with the buxom brunette moaner and her eager friends. She moved away to reclaim the center position with her camera behind the gate. The conversation she'd overheard set a slow burning inside her belly. She bit her lip from the inner struggle to overcome her anger at him, and the unwilling admission that she ... *what?*

Loved him.

She squeezed her eyes shut for a second, the loud hum of voices in the arena drowned out by the sudden realization of how deeply she did feel for Gabe. Listening to the women comment on how they planned to try to seduce him with their lush bodies triggered the little green monster inside her. Jealousy. Why would she feel jealous over a man she was supposed to be hating right now?

*Because you don't hate him. Not even for what he did.*

With shaking fingers, Lilly focused her camera on the center of the arena. Both horse and rider looked very calm, and so beautiful together it nearly broke her heart—like a sculpted statue of finest flesh and marble. He pressed his hat down low over his forehead, hiding his eyes from her. His lips moved when he whispered to his horse, the animal's ears flicked back to capture his words. She knew the sound of that rough, soft voice when he shared his passion. Her pussy clenched with remembrance too. She bit her lip at her body's sudden, telltale weakness.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"In the arena," the announcer's voice blasted through the speakers. "Another hometown boy, and last year's champion, Gabriel Abendstern aboard eight-year-old Appaloosa cutter stallion, Warrior."

The clapping died down and the crowd grew silent in anticipation. The clock buzzed. Lilly kept her lens focused on Gabe and his magnificent horse. She imagined she could hear the kissing sound he made with his lips to cue Warrior to move up. The herd scattered, splitting into two. Warrior whirled on his haunches, digging deep into the arena soil, sending his long mane and tail whipping around behind like a cloud of white smoke. The crowd erupted with screams of approval. The herd united as one for a split second before the lead steer was separated, forced away from the others by Warrior's outstretched head and neck. The steer bellowed its frustration when the rest of the herd deserted it.

Gabe sat still in the saddle, large hands on the saddle horn, the reins looping down to Warrior's spread knees. The steer attempted to spin back to avoid them. Warrior bolted forward, ears laid back, large eyes flashing with determination. He cut the steer back to center, almost touching noses with it, matching it perfectly stride for stride. The crowd clapped, screamed and whistled.

Lilly kept her finger pressed down on the shutter button, snapping photos of every twist and turn in the striking ballet

between horse and rider and the lightening-quick movements of the steer.

The arena clock buzzed. Gabe pulled back on the reins. Warrior slid to a halt, letting the steer scramble away to rejoin the herd. The noise of the crowd magnified ten fold, drowning out the announcer's voice. Lilly's camera hummed in her hands as the spent film roll rewound inside the metal housing. It was over! She knew he'd be victorious. He exuded calm confidence, yet never boasted of his skill. Gabe was the kind of man who let his actions speak louder than his words.

*He already proved to you how much he cares. Your body has never been loved so thoroughly—and carefully.*

She moved away from the gate, leaving the screaming women to greet him when he came out. He wouldn't want her congratulations now—especially not after witnessing her kiss with Jimmy Boyd. She walked quickly back down the aisle and up the stairs to reclaim her seat with Marta and George.

"Oh, don't tell me you missed that, hon'?" George's enthusiasm shone in his eyes.

"No, I saw everything from ground level. I got some great pictures too."

"Wasn't it wonderful?" Marta bounced in her seat with excitement. "Such a team they were."

Lilly sat down, knowing that Carlo would be having his turn next in the arena below, but wanting so very much to run back to her hotel room and have a good cry. She'd been so brainless. Her attempt at retaliation with Jimmy Boyd was shameful and unfair. It disgusted her.

She sat between Marta and George, numb and hurting on the inside, while Carlo and his horse, Shadow Walker, took their turn with the steers. The horse was young and less experienced than his older brother, Warrior. The steer slipped by him after only five seconds. Marta collapsed back in her seat with a howl of sadness. George reached over and rubbed her back consolingly while she mumbled quiet, disheartened words in Spanish.

"If you don't mind," Lilly said to them both. "I think I'll go back to the hotel now."

"Are you alright?" George's eyes flicked from the arena to hers.

"Yes." She ground out irritably. "I'm just tired. I didn't get a lot of rest last night."

"Hmm," he nodded. "Understandable. You'll be ready for the ball tonight?"

She looked away, afraid he could see the turmoil she felt. "Yes, I'll be there."

"Good. Never be ashamed to admit what you're feeling, hon'. Now, go on and rest yourself. We'll be there soon to get ready, too."

Lilly offered Marta a quick hug for consolation before she left. Once outside the crowded arena, she picked up her pace and walked briskly past the vendors and carnival rides, their sounds and smells barely a recognizable blur in her mind. She crossed the street and made a beeline for the hotel at the end of the block.

Saturday shoppers and families going to and from the rodeo filled the sidewalk, forcing Lilly to slow her steps. She

dodged a small child waving an ice cream cone in the air and bumped shoulders with an old woman coming out of a store.

"Oh! Excuse me." She reached out to steady the older woman, instantly captivated by a pair of sparkling green eyes the color of spring grass. The seams and folds of the old woman's face smoothed into a smile. An elaborately coiled braid crowned her head and gleamed like polished silver in the sunlight.

"That's so nice, dear." The woman said with a whispery voice. "So many people in such a rush today. Thank you for stopping by. Please, do come in. I have something for you."

Lilly blinked, not sure she heard the woman correctly or if she was delusional. Perhaps she had Alzheimer's? The old woman hooked onto Lilly's hand with surprising strength in her gnarled fingers and tugged her out of pedestrian traffic and into the doorway. A sign overhead declared this shop to be 'Clara's—Dressmaker to the Stars'.

Lilly held the door open. "Is there something I can help you with? Or is someone here to look after you?"

The old woman clucked her tongue and pulled Lilly inside the shop, closing the door on the noisy street. She let go of her hand and motioned for her to follow.

"Come, come. I promise you'll like it."

Bolts of fabric in every imaginable color, pattern and texture lined the walls. A very modern, sleek looking sewing machine dominated the space by the front window. On a large worktable lay tissue cutouts for patterns, scissors and tape measures. Lilly glanced around, hoping to see if another

responsible adult would appear, to take care of this old woman.

"Hello?" She called out. "Is anyone else here?"

The old woman stopped, turned to look at Lilly and put her hands on hips. "Don't be silly, girl. I'm Clara. Now hurry up, I haven't much time."

Feeling more irritable with each passing minute, Lilly sighed in exasperation. "Nice to meet you, Clara. I don't have time for this nonsense either," she mumbled.

She followed the old woman to the back of the shop, into a large fitting room. Three, floor length mirrors framed a carpeted podium. The old lady was busy shuffling through racks filled to bursting with cloth garment bags.

Clara whispered, barely loud enough for Lilly to hear. "No, not that one, it's too yellow. Hmm, not that one, it's too heavy. Where is it? Ah ha! That's the one I'm looking for."

She lifted one garment bag down from the rack and whirled about, her tailors' smock flowing out from her waist like a bell. "This is the one, dear."

Lilly was torn between wanting to humor the old woman and the gnawing need to seek the privacy of her hotel room. "What is it?"

"Your gown, of course. For the Ball."

Her mouth fell open in surprise. "How ... how do you know that?"

Clara clucked at her again, the wrinkles across her brow deepening with an impatient frown. "Of course I know. Hurry, off with those."

Lilly stood rooted to the spot, curious and astounded by this strange woman. She watched, fascinated while the old lady hung the garment bag on a peg and began sliding the long zipper open. A flowing, shimmering waterfall of palest blush gossamer spilled out. Clara peeled the bag away from the curved wooden hanger holding the gown in place, and stood back to admire it.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Clara sighed wistfully. "And still in perfect condition."

Lilly's breath left her in a rush. She walked toward it as if in a trance, admiring the soft hint of color. The sleeveless bodice was adorned with crepe all around, crossing between the breasts, adding a gorgeous texture to the silk. She fingered the delicate, draping folds of the floor length skirt. Multiple layers of tissue-thin fabric rippled and slid through her hands. It was elegant and classic, designed to enhance the natural shape of a woman's body without giving too much away.

"Ginger Rogers would have worn this gown to dance with Fred Astaire."

"That's because she did." Clara laughed. "Now hurry. Up on the pad with you and take off your clothes."

"Oh, no, I couldn't. I can't afford it. I'm sure it's very expensive."

"Nonsense. This gown belongs to you."

"What?" Lilly shook her head. "You're not making any sense. It's not mine."

Clara's eyes narrowed, the green depths swirling with mystery—or madness—Lilly couldn't decide which.

"It *does* belong to you," the old woman declared with a firm voice. "Try it on. You'll see, it will fit you perfectly."

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, Lilly finally walked into the hotel lobby, carrying the garment bag and gown that Clara insisted belonged to her. After leaving Clara's mysterious little shop, Lilly ventured into a nearby shoe store and purchased a pair of low-heeled dressy sandals. At the corner pharmacy, she bought a tube of pink tinted lip-gloss, mascara, and crystal tipped hairpins. The whole experience left her feeling as if she'd walked through an alternate universe where nothing was real and made no sense no matter which angle you studied it from. She didn't believe in fairy-tales, but this one came damn close to the mystery and magic of such fantasies. If the gown suddenly turned into a pumpkin at midnight, she promised herself she wouldn't be too surprised.

She jostled her key out of the door to her hotel room and stepped inside. She froze. A vase and huge bouquet of red roses stood on the table.

Carefully, she laid the gown and her packages on the bed before approaching the table. The delicate fragrance filled her room. She plucked the card from the flowers and held her breath. Would Gabe have sent them to her? A rush of warmth flooded her body and her heart thumped with anticipation as she read the card.

*You promised me a kiss and a dance. Or two.  
See you tonight, Jimmy*

Her breath rushed from her lungs. Disappointment laced with regret stung her like salt rubbed into an open wound.

She didn't want to deal with Jimmy Boyd now. She wanted to see Gabe, to dance with him and feel his strong arms holding her close against his hard, heavenly body. Her womb clenched with the hungry need for him again, reminding her of how good it felt, how right, to be filled with his thick cock. Being with him made her feel whole. Complete. Incredibly happy.

With a frustrated moan, she tossed the card down on the table and headed into the bathroom. She had an hour to get ready for the Cattleman's Ball. She'd think of some excuse to give Jimmy between now and then. Maybe he wouldn't care if she didn't keep her stupid promise to dance with him—and kiss him again? There would be plenty of women to keep him happy and occupied tonight.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

At eight o'clock an urgent knock on the door made Lilly jump. She took a deep breath and finished putting the last crystal pin in her hair, securing the thick mass up in the French twist.

"Coming!" she yelled. Her stomach fluttered. Not one or two butterflies, a whole horde of them flapped their wings inside her. The gown her fit perfectly. It wasn't white, it wasn't pink. The color glowed like the warm blush of dawn on freshly fallen snow. It worked perfectly with her auburn hair and pale skin. She smiled at her reflection—it made her feel pretty. She hoped desperately that Gabe would think so too.

With one last satisfied look in the mirror she walked away from the dresser to answer the door. Marta's beaming smile greeted her when she pulled it open.

"Ready? Oh, Dios mio!" Marta clapped her hands together, her eyes glancing happily up and down Lilly's gown.

"Senorita, you look like a princess. So beautiful!"

Lilly smoothed her hands down the silky skirt. "Thank you. And wow! So do you."

Marta did look beautiful in a dark red, satin gown with a heart shaped bodice that dipped low across her ample bosom. Her long, shiny black hair was captured up in a knot on top of her head. A waterfall of diamonds and rubies sparkled and dripped from her earlobes to the tops of her round shoulders, and more glittering gems circled her wrists. In the hallway behind Marta stood Carlo, George, and Gabe. All three men

dressed immaculately in black tuxedos, bright white shirts and black bow ties. The trio looked so devilishly attractive ... despite the cowboy boots on their feet. A bubble of laughter trembled on Lilly's lips.

"What is so funny?" Carlo looked at his feet.

"Um, nothing. You look very handsome, Carlo. I like your boots."

"Come on, we don't want to be late." Marta hooked her arm into Lilly's and pulled her from the room.

"It's customary for the men to wear cowboy boots to the Cattleman's Ball." George chuckled, following in step behind them. "Be glad we're not wearing our hats, too."

Lilly glanced over her bare shoulder. Gabe walked beside Carlo and his father, and watched her with darkly brooding eyes. His firm, chiseled lips quirked into a sardonic smile. Yet he kept his distance between them. She ached to pull away from Marta and run to him, beg him to hold her. To love her.

The delicate, silky layers of her gown swished and fluttered around her legs and hips, caressing her skin with whispery softness. Keeping her eyes forward again, she smiled secretly with the knowledge that beneath the gown she was naked. No panty hose, and no panties. Tonight, she wanted to feel beautiful *and* decadent. When she danced with Gabe she wanted to feel every gorgeous inch of him as their bodies pressed together.

Marta steered Lilly through the crowded lobby, the men following close behind. More people dressed to the height of New York fashions walked into the hotel from the street. Shouts of greetings and congratulations on Gabe's win in the

arena punctured her secretive musing. Both Gabe and his father stopped to shake hands and chat with their friends.

"We'll go inside and find our table," she heard Carlo tell them. He guided both women away from the lobby to the ballroom on the other side of the hotel.

The vibrant sound of live country western music filled the glittering ballroom. The band played a catchy tune she didn't recognize, but she felt the thrill of the beat inside her blood. Several younger couples were already out on the large wooden dance floor, swinging in their colorful gowns and tuxedos.

Round tables framed the dance floor and flanked the stage, filling the ballroom from end to end. Couples milled around them, chatting animatedly in groups, drinking champagne from fluted glasses, laughing.

"This way, my ladies." Carlo strutted across the floor with both ladies on his arms, toward a table away from the stage. Their table, like all of them, was lavishly decorated with white cloth and tall, creamy candles set inside coiled ropes. Blue-green pine and golden leafed aspen branches had been carefully tucked inside the ropes for greenery. Around each place setting lay a silver, rowled spur as a napkin holder. The attention to detail left Lilly a bit breathless.

"Everything's so beautiful." She took her seat at the table beside Carlo.

"Yes, this is *the* party to be at in the West. It used to be a small local affair, with ranchers from the surrounding counties." Carlo raised his voice slightly to be heard over the music. "But in the last ten years or so, it's become very

popular. The money from ticket sales is used to help many charities."

"What's the name of the band? I'm not really familiar with country music, but I like what they're playing."

"Clint Black!" Marta gushed, leaning forward past her husband and exposing a dangerous amount of cleavage. "You haven't heard of him? He's not on stage yet, just his band warming up. After the awards ceremony, you'll see. Oh, he's so handsome. And his voice when he sings..."

Carlo snorted at her. Marta laughed and rubbed her hand over his belly above the black stripe of his cummerbund. "I only have eyes for you, mi amor." She said it to him, but winked at Lilly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lilly saw Gabe standing with his father while he talked to a small group of people near the dance floor. Dear God, *he* was the most gorgeous man alive. As if sensing she looked his way, he turned his head and locked eyes with her across the distance. He left his father's side and walked through the crowd to their table.

Her heart thudded inside her chest, making her breathing shallow. She felt powerless to tear her eyes from him. Carlo mumbled something about dancing with Marta, and they quickly disappeared, leaving her alone at the table.

Without their buffering presence, an unexpected flood of vulnerability assaulted Lilly. She studied her hands in her lap and swallowed a thick lump in her throat. He pulled out the chair next to hers and sat down, scooting it close. Then he twisted in his seat, leaned forward and draped his arm over

the back of her chair. He didn't touch her, but the heat from his hand tingled along the bare skin of her shoulder.

"We need to talk."

She trembled at the rough, needy sound in his voice. Not trusting herself to speak past the tightness in her throat. He slid his fingers along her shoulder, drawing tiny circles of awareness on her skin. Goose bumps skittered up her arms. He reached into her lap and cupped one of her hands, holding it tight inside his.

"Lilly," his voice dropped to a husky groan. "God, you're so beautiful, it's killing me. Look at me, please."

She swallowed again, wishing the waiter would hurry up and bring them some water to wash away the cotton balls stuck in her throat.

"I'm sorry." She said finally, glancing up at him quickly before she lost the nerve to do it and say what needed to spill from her heart.

"You're sorry?" He blinked, looking very confused. "Sugar, what the hell for? I need to beg your forgiveness. I had no right to do what I did. Never. I know I hurt you, Lilly. And I'm sorry."

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes and she looked away from him, out toward the dance floor. It was filling rapidly as couples joined each other under the swaying tunes of a slow song played by guitar and drums.

"Lilly? Can you forgive me for being such a stupid, arrogant ass?"

She sniffled and nodded, turning her attention back to his earnest, sincere, and oh so handsome face. "Yes, Gabe. I do."

I'm sorry I turned away from you. I know why you did it. I understand, and I guess I'm grateful you still like me enough, knowing what you do about me, to talk with me again."

His hand skimmed up her shoulder to the back of her bare neck, his fingers caressing the side of her throat and sending arcs of raw desire through her body. She shuddered and closed her eyes under the promise of his touch.

"Dance with me, Lilly," he whispered against her ear.

He stood and pulled her chair out, keeping her hand firmly inside his to aid her in rising. He led the way through the crowd and tables to the dance floor, keeping a tight grip on her hand. When they reached the wooden floor, he spun around and gently enveloped her in his arms.

The song's tempo was very slow. They swayed together. Lilly sighed against his chest, her cheek resting on the soft fabric of his black satin lapel. Gabe wrapped one arm snug around the curve of her back, pressing her even closer to his body, joining their hips together. He lifted her other hand up to his mouth and kissed it before tucking it against his heart.

She closed her eyes. This was heaven. Sheer, beautiful, exquisite heaven. And beneath the paper-thin layers of her gown, she did feel the bulge of his impressive cock, growing harder against her belly. Instinct made her arch into him, rubbing her mound on his groin. Liquid heat flooded her pussy, making the sensitive lips between her legs feel slick and creamy while she moved with him.

"I missed you," she said against his shirt.

He chuckled softly, sliding his lips over the top of her hair. "Oh God, sugar, not nearly as much as I have. Trust me, I've

been in such a state of arousal I could hardly breathe each time I saw you. Nothing in my life hurt so badly as when you turned away from me. I never want to feel that way again."

"Neither do I."

His arm tightened around her waist, thrusting the hard line of his cock firmly into her soft mound. She moaned into his shirt, placing tiny kisses on the fabric covering his chest. Nobody else on the dance floor existed except them.

"Gabe? How long do we have to stay here tonight?"

She felt his whole body harden beneath her hands. "It's already been too long. Come with me now, to my room."

She tipped her face up to his. "But, what about the awards ceremony? You'll miss getting your trophy."

"Screw the damn trophy. I need you. I want you now."

"Oh, please, yes. Yes."

He took her hand and tugged her through the crowded dance floor, dodging couples joined at the head and hips in much the same way they had been. The music ended on a long note. Gabe suddenly stopped moving and Lilly collided with his broad back. Puzzled at his wait, every inch of her body yearning for him to run with her to his room, she peeked around his shoulder to see what kept him rooted to the spot.

A woman stood there, staring at him with obvious adoration in her large, blue-gray eyes. Her exquisite face turned up to his and she smiled from lush, ruby tinted lips.

"Hello, darling. I'm here."

Gabe's hand tightened almost painfully on Lilly's. She looked between Gabe and the woman who was quite possibly

the most beautiful female she'd ever seen up close. Pale blonde hair flowed loose down to her elbows, tucked behind her delicate ears to show off the large, Tahitian pearls dangling from her lobes. Her porcelain smooth skin looked almost as fragile as a baby's. A black silk halter gown hugged her slender curves and dipped low enough in front to show a hint of small, firm breasts.

"Amanda." Gabe growled the name.

Lilly flinched.

"Yes, Gabe." The woman's voice was breathy, raspy and sensuous. "I told you I'd come. I heard you won the cutting event. Congratulations."

The woman turned her eyes to Lilly. Delicate, pale eyebrows arched up in question. She lifted her chin a notch, and smiled innocently. "And who's your ... friend?"

Gabe tried to pull Lilly behind his back. "Nobody you know."

Lilly flinched again when another hand captured her elbow. She turned to see Gabe's father standing behind her, his eyes narrowed fiercely between Amanda and Gabe.

"Son, what's going on here?"

"Nothing I can't handle. Take her." He thrust Lilly's hand out to him, his face a blank mask of concentration on Amanda.

George slid a strong arm around her shoulders, and urged Lilly away. "Come with me."

She yanked her hand out of Gabe's and allowed his father to pull her along. She craned her neck to see Amanda's hand slip into the crook of Gabe's arm. He escorted her off the



dance floor, toward the door exiting the ballroom. Her heart shattered, seeing the way the woman leaned into his body with soft affection. Her pale head rested on his broad shoulder before they disappeared from her view.

Out on the dance floor again, George wrapped Lilly in his arms and held her tight. Vaguely she could tell the music started again, another slow song. Coldness settled inside her, making her stiff, her movements rigid and painful.

"I don't want to dance with you, George," she said, glaring at him. "Let me go."

"Hush, Lilly. Don't be upset. Just give him a minute to deal with her." George's arms were as strong as Gabe's. Like father, like son, she thought morosely.

"They're still engaged, aren't they? He lied to me!"

His grip tightened on her hand and at her waist. "No. Don't be foolish. You're the woman he wants, Lilly. Can't you see that?"

Her world was crumbling around her. She shook from the effort to keep her pain at bay.

She turned her face away, refusing to look at him. "I'm a fool. Oh, dear God, I'm so stupid! Let go of me. I want to leave."

George cupped the back of her head and tucked her face into his shoulder. "No, Lilly. No. Trust me. I know my son. He'll be back for you. Real soon. I promise."

"You're lying. This is just some trick to torture me." She tried jerking away, but he held her firm. She felt like a rag doll held captive while they danced to the slow song the band played.

"This will all be over in a minute," his voice rumbled in her ears. "Trust me, he won't linger with her. He loves you."

"Stop lying to me! I hate him."

George groaned as if she'd kicked him in the stomach.

"No, you don't. I'm not blind, Lilly. You two eat each other up with your eyes. Even from a distance any fool can see how much you want him. And he wants you. Now, I know what you're thinking. But Gabe doesn't love her. He never did. Now just settle down and..."

Jimmy's voice sounded behind her. "Mind if I cut in now?"

She twisted around to see him, his boyish good looks roguishly attractive in his tuxedo and leather bolo tie.

"James Boyd," George said. It wasn't quite a greeting, more of a warning that Lilly sensed more than she understood.

No matter. Right now he exemplified her salvation, her freedom from two men who wanted to control her life and make her miserable. She pulled from George's grip with sheer determination.

"Yes," she said, gritting her teeth. "I would *love* to dance with you, Jimmy."

George let go of her reluctantly, a dark scowl hardening his face. "I'll be watching you, James. Don't do anything stupid."

Jimmy gave him a wide, bright smile. "Wouldn't think of it, Mr. Abendstern, sir."

He circled her waist and swept her away from George. Lilly took a couple of deep breaths to regain her composure, and the courage to give him a grateful, shy smile.

"Thank you. I needed rescuing."

"Not a problem, sweetheart. Thought you'd be used to having men fight over you."

She stared at him, not certain what he meant. "No, that's never happened."

"I don't believe that for a second." His eyes swept down her body and he grinned. "You sure look good enough to eat in that dress."

She felt a blush creep up into her cheeks, warming them after feeling so cold. "Thanks. Can we go somewhere quiet, away from everyone else? I need to catch my breath."

"Sure thing." Jimmy's dark green eyes swirled with triumph. "Let's dance over to the other edge so the old man can't see us. There's a door there that leads out to a little porch. Shouldn't be anybody there yet."

He felt dangerous and she was nervous about tempting him. But the cold, aching emptiness inside her begged for anything to take the hurt from Gabe's lies out of her soul. With a forced, brave smile she let Jimmy lead her toward that door.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Gabe pulled Amanda into a quiet corner of the hotel lobby, shielding her from curious eyes with his body. What he had to say to her would be as quick and painless as possible, so long as she got the message clearly enough once and for all.

"Now. Tell me again what the hell you're doing here?"

"Oh, sweetie," Amanda crooned with a beguiling smile. "You aren't still upset, are you?" She stepped closer to him and ran her fingertips up his arms to his shoulders. Her fingers tightened around his neck, drawing him even closer.

Gabe stood absolutely still, waiting to see how far she'd go in this obvious charade. She'd never come on to him before. Why now?

She sighed longingly, her red lips plumped out in a moue for kissing. "I thought it would be a nice surprise to see you, to watch you accept your trophy. I never realized what a lovely party this was before. I feel like I fit right in here."

At the touch of her erect, pointy nipples on his chest he stiffened. They were almost as sharp as twin knife points. She swayed against him, rubbing those tips seductively back and forth. If she'd done this to him months ago, he might have felt something arousing in it. Right now, it revolted him. Was he supposed to simply forget she was screwing another man while they were engaged?

"Let me get this straight. You feel comfortable here now?" He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Are you telling me you actually like it as much as New York?"

"Hmm, yes." Her hand snaked down to the waistband of his pants. She tucked two fingers inside, searching for the head of his cock. "So, who was that ... woman, the one I saw you dancing with?"

Not finding the tip of his expected erection under her questing fingers, Amanda ran her hand down to cup his balls. She squeezed them, massaging the firm, round sacks inside his pants. He closed his eyes for a second. Disgust and a flash of anger roiled inside him. All he could think about was the sick feeling in his stomach when he'd felt Lilly flinch at mention of Amanda's name. Her obvious shock and pain burned a hole in his heart. He didn't even want to imagine what was going through Lilly's head right now.

Gabe peeled Amanda's fingers from his crotch and knocked them away. "She's the woman I love. That's all you need to know. Go home, Amanda."

Her eyes flickered. As usual, she recovered quickly and hid anything else she might be feeling by lowering her lashes. A sly smile curved her red painted mouth, making her look seductive and wanton ... as if he'd just fucked her good and hard and she hadn't had enough.

"You don't love her, Gabe." She nudged one knee between his and captured his thigh between her legs. "Whoever she is," she rubbed her crotch along his upper thigh. "Mmm ... I know she's simply a passing fancy to make me jealous. How could you possibly find such a dowdy twit attractive? When you have me." She sighed, blowing hot breath into his face. "I forgive you. Now, come on, sweetie ... take me to your room. We can dance in bed tonight."

She pressed her firm tits into his chest again. He put his hands up to keep her away. He could feel her rib bones. Why had he never noticed before how skinny Amanda really was? Or how cold and conniving she was? If she loved anyone other than herself, it would truly be a miracle.

Just the thought of Lilly's soft, lush curves under his hands and her long, slender limbs wrapped around him while she bucked and shuttered through her orgasm ... *that* was arousing. In sharp contrast to Amanda, Lilly wore her heart on her sleeve, even though she tried hard to hide it. And even though she hadn't admitted it yet, he knew she loved him too.

He pushed Amanda back against the wall, holding her as far from his body as he could. "Stop it, Amanda. Now, you listen to me. I don't love you. You don't love me either. We never have been in love with each other. But I *am* in love with her and I'm *marrying her*."

She blinked rapidly, as if a dust storm had swirled into her face. As quickly as flipping on a switch, her face changed from lusty to outrage. "What? You can't marry that woman. That's ridiculous! You'll be the laughing stock of New York. You need a woman like me at your side, Gabe. Admit it."

Gabe grasped more firmly onto Amanda's upper arms and gave her a little shake. Carefully, he exerted his strength over her now, more than he'd ever dared to with a woman before. Her eyes went wide from the moment of pain and her mouth popped open. But finally, he had her complete attention and focus.

"We're done, Amanda!" he growled into her face. "Go home. You need to leave and never come back here. Ever. Do you understand that?"

Amanda stiffened, the shutters dropped down over her eyes again, turning the blue-gray color to hard, cold slate. He let go of her, watching her warily for any more stupid tricks. She rubbed her upper arms where his fingers had bitten into the pale skin, leaving angry red marks. He wasn't proud of what he'd just done. He doubted if she'd have listened without the physical hurt he inflicted. It disgusted him.

"Well, well." She sucked breath in between her clenched teeth. "I guess I do understand now. You've just made the biggest mistake of your life. I can't believe what an idiot you really are, Gabe. I'm so much better off without you!"

He backed away and pointed to the hotel lobby door, where taxis waited to shuttle guests away. "Go, Amanda. Don't come back."

With a final angry glare, Amanda walked away, holding her body stiff and her head high. He waited in the lobby until the taillights of her taxi disappeared down the street. A huge weight had lifted from his shoulders. He turned back to the ballroom ... where Lilly waited for him. Oh yes, he had plans for that beautiful woman. Plans that would last all night long and for the rest of their lives together.

Gabe found his dad, Carlo and Marta standing in the hall near the ballroom. Lilly was conspicuously absent. The concerned frowns the three of them gave him when he walked up set off an alarm inside his head.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

His dad's heavy sigh spelled trouble. "She was dancing with James Boyd the last I saw her. Then she disappeared."

Gabe turned on his father. "What? You let her dance with that little fuck-wad?" He turned to walk back inside the noisy, crowded ballroom. They followed him closely. "And what the hell do you mean, she disappeared? Did she walk back to her room?"

"I checked her room. She's not there." Marta's voice was high, indicating her worry.

Gabe stopped mid-stride. "Did you check my room?"

Carlo nodded, then shook his head. "I checked. She's not there either."

"We need to split up and look inside." George raked his fingers through his silver hair. "I'm sorry, son. She's very upset and wanted to dance with him. I couldn't very well tell her 'no'. She's not a child."

"I know." Gabe patted his dad on the shoulder. "Lilly can be pretty bullheaded when she's up for it. Let's split up and meet back here."

Gabe made it all the way around the ballroom and stood on the opposite side of the dance floor near the back of the stage. His path had been torturously slow due to all the people he'd had to speak with and greet along the way. Still, there was no sign of Lilly ... or James Boyd. He craned his neck to look over the gyrating mass of dancing couples on the floor. On the other side of the ballroom, his dad and Marta waited at the door. Carlo was threading his way back to them. They hadn't found her either.



If Boyd so much as laid one finger on Lilly, he'd break every bone in his damned body this time. The memory of Megan's screams echoed in his mind. His sister had lived at the ranch with him during summer breaks. One summer she met James Boyd and started dating him. They went out to see the latest James Bond flick in town. Luckily for her, Gabe and a couple buddies decided to go see the same movie. He saw Boyd practically drag Megan from the theater not less than halfway through the show. Knowing his sister had a crush on Timothy Dalton at the time, and would never have left the theater so soon on her own, Gabe followed them.

He'd found Boyd's truck in the parking lot by following the sound of muffled screams. His sister was pinned under Boyd in the front seat while he tried to rip off her blouse and cover her mouth with one hand at the same time. It was pretty clear what he intended to do. Boyd had been lucky to get away with a warning and a broken nose that night.

\* \* \* \*

"Thanks for the flowers, Jimmy." Lilly walked beside him, rubbing her bare arms briskly to ward off the intensely cold night air.

Jimmy halted by the patio wall. "Glad you liked them. I'm still waiting ... for my kiss."

The sound of the music inside was muted behind the door, yet the beat still throbbed inside her head. She glanced up at his boyish smile, a feeling of wary shyness stealing her bravado from a few minutes ago when she'd foolishly agreed to come out here with him.

"Well, I ... I don't know if we should be doing this. It might be best if I just go back inside. I'm not feeling that well."

Without a word he grabbed her by the wrists and yanked her into his embrace, crushing his mouth down on hers in a brutal, hard kiss. Lilly panicked and twisted her face away. His mouth was everywhere—on her neck, shoulders, and the swell of her breasts above her bodice. No matter which way she turned she couldn't escape his assault. He scraped his teeth on her skin and she yelped from the pain. Did he draw blood?

"Stop it!" She tried pulling her wrists free, but he shackled her with a firm grip that also threatened to cut off circulation. His wiry, slender build belied great strength.

Jimmy's face transformed with cruel intent, going from boyishly handsome to twisted with powerful anger. His eyes gleamed with demented intent. "I know your type. You're a tease, aren't you? All sweet and innocent looking ... ready for me to fuck the hell out of you, right?"

Lilly gasped. His grip on her wrists threatened to snap her bones. "You're hurting me!"

"Don't play coy, sweetheart. You like the pain, don't you?"

She shook her head so hard her hair came undone. Crystal pins fell to the patio floor with pinging sounds. "No. Let go of me!"

For one split second he did, only to wrap his arms like steel cages around hers, trapping her against his lean hardness. Now she could barely breathe. She felt her eyes bulge from paralyzing fear. He thrust the hard line of his groin into her buttocks.

"Feel that? That's for you. I'm gonna give it to you, real hard. Just like you want it."

Deep inside, from a tiny place she thought had long been snuffed out by her previous torture at the hands of Craig, a spark of anger flared into her conscience. She renewed her struggles, kicking at his shins with the heel of her sandals.

"Stop it! God damn it ... I'm so sick and tired of being manhandled by apes like you. Let go!"

He dragged her away from the door, lifting her off her feet. "Yeah, fight like that. That's what I like. We're gonna have some fun now."

\* \* \* \*

The music blasted at Gabe from the giant speakers near the stage. One sound didn't fit in with the beat. He turned his head toward the exit door near the stage, listening carefully. It sounded like a thump, coming from the other side of the door. He waited for a moment, uncertain if he'd actually heard it or not. Perhaps someone was locked out and trying to get back inside?

He pushed on the handle and opened the door. Seeing nobody, he stepped out and looked behind the door out toward the dark, empty patio. His breath frosted on the air in front of his face. Whoever was out here had better be wearing a coat.

"No! Stop, Jimmy."

Gabe whipped his attention around to the sound of that voice, coming from some distance away. Lilly. And James Boyd. Where was she? Fear for her turned to icy rage. He

sprinted across the patio and jumped down the four stairs that lead to a path, into the dark hotel garden and swimming pool area. He moved forward quickly, silently, until he heard Boyd's voice clearly.

"Be quiet, sweetheart. I got a big surprise for you."

The pool gate stood open. Gabe stepped past it into sight. In the darkness, Lilly's gown glowed in the icy light of the moon. She struggled in Boyd's embrace, kicking and squirming like an angry cat. He dragged her along, past the shimmering dark blue water in the pool, heading toward the abandoned pool supply shed.

"Boyd!"

Jimmy swung around, holding Lilly tight with both arms, pinning hers at her waist. She was shackled to his body as he half lifted, half dragged her with him. Her eyes went wide when she saw him. Then she grunted and renewed her efforts to fight him off.

"Let go of me!" she demanded furiously.

"Shut up, bitch!" Boyd squeezed her in a bear hug until she stopped moving.

Gabe locked eyes with Lilly. He could tell she was afraid, but she was also angry. That was good. It meant she wouldn't be falling apart from hysterics. "The lady said to let her go. I suggest you do that."

Boyd's brittle laughter crackled on the cold night air. "She's comin' with me, Abendstern. I've got some unfinished business with this teasing bitch and you're not invited. Stay out of it."

"Wrong. She's my woman," Gabe stretched his mouth into a cruel smile. "Now let her go."

"No! You get the fuck outta here."

Gabe walked toward them, casually, as if he was there simply to admire the moonlight on the pool water. He unbuttoned his tuxedo jacket and undid the knot of his bowtie. He watched Lilly with a critical eye ... she was too still. He hoped she wouldn't faint from lack of air. James didn't seem to be letting up on that bear hug yet.

"Boyd, you remember that night about fifteen years ago, don't you?"

James snickered and jerked Lilly up against his chest. She gasped. "Yeah. You weren't minding your own business back then either, you nosy bastard. Always doin' the right thing. Always the fuckin' hero, aren't you?"

Gabe inched his way closer, shoving his hands inside his pants pockets. Lilly's eyes were glued on him, wide with fear, sparkling in the moonlight with unshed tears.

"I try to do what's right, Boyd. You never learned how to treat a woman properly. I thought you learned your lesson back then, but apparently not. That's a real shame, too. It just means I'll have to keep my promise to you. You remember what I promised you, right?"

Boyd walked backwards, closer to the pool shed, still crushing Lilly in front of him. He was using her as a shield—the freaking coward. Gabe took a deep, long breath, forcing calm and concentration into his mind, readying his body for an attack. His blood pumped hot and eager in his veins, sounding loud in his ears. Remaining outwardly calm

unnerved an opponent nine times out of ten. He had to figure out how to get Lilly away from him unharmed. In about three steps, Boyd's back would be up against the pool shed. He'd have nowhere else to go then. That would be his breaking point. He'd either fight, or flee.

Gabe hoped for the latter. His goal was to get Lilly safe. Once he knew she was okay, he'd have time to hunt down James Boyd.

He slid his tuxedo jacket off and crooked it over his shoulder with one finger. Boyd would think this action to be cocky and casual. He'd have no idea that Gabe's arm and hand were poised to strike him in the temple. If he could actually get close enough and keep Lilly out of the way.

"That's close enough," Boyd snarled. He had his back to the shed, his eyes darting nervously around the pool area.

"Let her go, Boyd. You know you can't win this thing between us."

Boyd's face turned purple with rage. He was breathing hard. Sweat shone on his forehead, glistening like splattered silver beads in the moonlight.

"Fuck!" Boyd's gaze flickered nervously toward the pool.

This was the deep end, twelve feet down. Gabe hoped Lilly could swim in that gown.

He'd guessed correctly. Boyd hurled Lilly into the pool, twisting his own body away to dart past the shed. Her shriek pierced the quiet night air before she splashed head first into the water. Gabe's instincts roared at him to reach for her, to keep her out of the water. But the fighter inside him refused to let Boyd escape. He launched himself after Boyd's

retreating form, tackling him by the legs. Together they crashed down on the concrete.

Boyd immediately tried to kick himself free, managing a powerful blow to Gabe's right shoulder with the heel of his boot. Gabe scrambled up on top of him, grabbed his lapels with both fists and knocked his head back against the concrete. Boyd grunted once, then peeled his lips back from his teeth and swung his arm up. Gabe blocked the swipe with his elbow and crashed his own fist into Boyd's jaw.

"That's enough!"

Distantly, Gabe heard people running toward him. The voice sounded like his father's. Breathing hard from adrenaline and the fight, he stared down at Boyd's suddenly calm face. The man lay unconscious. Many strong hands plucked at Gabe's shoulders, trying to get him to stand up.

"It's over, son."

Gabe looked up to his father, Carlo and two other men. He glanced behind him toward the pool. Marta and several other people were helping Lilly climb out of the water. Through the haze in his eyes, he barely recognized any of them. The one he did recognize was Sheriff MacIver.

He shook himself free of his father's and Carlo's restraining hands. "I'm okay," he growled at them more gruffly than he intended. He stared down at Boyd. "Make sure he doesn't go anywhere."

Lilly stood between Marta and two other women, a waterfall dripped from her ruined gown, her hair lay plastered against her head and face. Her body wracked with powerful shivering. She must be freezing. The Sheriff slid his jacket off

and wrapped her in it. When she looked up and saw Gabe approaching she pushed the women away, dropped the Sheriff's jacket and ran to him.

Nothing else mattered to Gabe at that point; just opening his arms and his heart to the woman he loved. She flew into his embrace and wrapped cold arms around his waist. He hugged her tight, pressing her icy body against the inferno that still raged inside him.

"I ... I was s-so scared," she mumbled wetly into his shirt.

"Shh, I know, sugar. Are you hurt?" He couldn't hold her close enough.

"N-no." She sniffled. "I'm cold."

Sheriff MacIver joined them, his cell phone glued to his ear. Marta and the other two women followed him. He recognized them now as Marta's friends from neighboring ranches. Their husbands stood with his dad and Carlo, keeping a careful watch on Boyd. In the distance, the sound of sirens sliced through the air, drawing closer to the hotel.

"Alrighty then." Sheriff MacIver snapped his cell phone shut. "Squad cars are on the way. Ambulance too. Miss Wilcox, are you sure you're not injured?"

Lilly shook her head against Gabe's chest. She tipped her face up to him, smiled bravely past the trembling in her chin, and then turned around in the protective cocoon of his arms to face the Sheriff. "I'm okay."

"Good. Gabe, why don't you take her inside? Get her into some dry clothes before she comes down to the station. I'll need her report for filing charges against James Boyd. Yours too, seeing as how you apprehended him first."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lilly stood in her studio with her paintbrush hovering over the canvas. This would be the last stroke. Once she touched the brush down, the panoramic landscape painting of the Evening Star Ranch would be completed. She hesitated, her hand wavering with uncertainty. With a heavy sigh, she stepped back and eyed the large painting from across the room. It encompassed everything wonderful in her life up to this point.

Even the day spent in court yesterday, for James Boyd's sentencing, couldn't dampen the joy. Fortunately, the proceedings had been blessedly swift in justice. Lilly's spirit felt uplifted and vindicated afterwards, knowing that James would be spending two years in jail for attempted kidnapping and assault. It felt good to know he wouldn't be able to hurt another woman.

When they arrived home yesterday evening, Gabe had spent several hours sitting in her studio, watching in silence while she worked. The closeness that had grown between Gabe and herself was like none she'd ever felt before with another human being. It had become a pleasant habit for them to cuddle after dinner on the sofa in the family room, watching TV or listening to music. Some nights, Marta and Carlo would join them. It was incredibly cozy.

It felt like home.

Did he love her? He hadn't said so yet. Even though every night, and sometimes during the day when he could escape

ranch duties to see her, he made love to her as if he did. The words had almost slipped out of her several times, only to be bitten back at the last minute. Why couldn't she say it?

*I'm afraid ... I've never said 'I love you' to a man before.*

How would he react if she told him how much she loved him? Would he say he did, too? Or would he just smile affectionately and go on with his life?

Her emotions ran rampant with uncertainty. She dipped her brush back into the dark green and gray swirl of paint on her pallet, not really seeing the color at all, but what it signified. The last brushstroke would mark the official end to her reason for being on the ranch. She didn't want it to end. Nobody had said anything yet about her leaving, but she knew her time here was done.

Would he even want a penniless, almost-starving-nobody artist as his wife? Would she be labeled a 'gold digger', a woman gainfully seeking the fabulous wealth and lifestyle of the Abendstern family?

Tomorrow was Gabe's birthday. The painting would be completed tonight. George had already told her he was entirely pleased with it. She lifted her brush, approached her canvas again and slowly touched the glossy paint across the shadows of the last mountain, deepening them, giving them life.

There. It was done. She signed her name in the lower right corner using her smallest sable brush dipped in brown paint.

Her hands trembled from the fresh rush of emotion. She set her pallet and brush aside and fell to her knees. Tears welled up inside her, squeezing her throat closed. She

couldn't breathe beyond a choking sound. This was by far her best work yet and she couldn't bear to look at it anymore. Her heart and soul had been used to create it. She loved it. She loved Gabe. She couldn't accept being parted from either one!

She hadn't seen him since early morning, when she'd awakened to his soft kisses. Without a word, she'd spread her legs beneath him and welcomed his claim of her body. She thrilled to the long, slow strokes of his tongue, dipping into her cunt and teasing her clit. God, how easily he brought her to orgasm. Her nipples tightened almost painfully with the memory of his suckling mouth. When he filled her with his cock, she felt whole and complete.

Ranch business had taken Gabe and Carlo into town again today. They weren't expected back until later this evening. Marta had gone grocery shopping and then sequestered herself in her kitchen, busy making an elaborate cake for Gabe's birthday. George would be flying in tomorrow. Lilly knew the plan was for her to fly back to New York City with him the next day—leaving Gabe and the painting behind forever.

She cried softly into her hands until the pain in her kneecaps from the hard wooden floor brought her back to her senses. She had two more days with Gabe, why spoil it with her morose attitude now? She wiped the wetness from her eyes with the backs of her hands and stood up. No matter what happened in the next two days, she would enjoy them as best as she could. Her life in New York would resume itself soon enough. Maybe she could escape the dreary, cold winter

months in the city and head out to New Mexico sooner than she originally planned?

*That's exactly what you need to do now—focus on your future.*

Lilly cleaned up her brushes and pallet board and put them away. Tomorrow she would pack everything up for the trip home. *Home?* No. Back to New York City. It wasn't home, not by a long shot. It was where she lived and worked.

She changed out of her paint-smeared smock and pulled on a clean pair of jeans, a soft cotton turtleneck sweater and then pulled her fleece jacket over that. Then she headed downstairs, following the tempting smell of chocolate cake that baked in the oven. When she walked into the kitchen, Marta was busy pouring a decadent amount of melted butter into a large bowl. The machine was set to high and lively country music blasted over the high-pitched whine of the mixer. Rather than try to talk over the noise, Lilly just waved to her. She took a bottle of white wine out of the refrigerator and poured herself a glass, then headed out to the patio.

The night was cold, the wind quiet. Overhead, a full moon hung low over the sharp, dark outline of the mountains, glowing against a velvety sky and a blanket of stars. She hugged her fleece jacket close against the silent, chilled air. Her sneakers made no sound on the flagstone when she walked under the rose-covered trellis. The fragrant red flowers and most of the leaves had dropped off with the approach of fall and the even colder promise of winter. She leaned against the wooden railing and sipped her wine,

admiring the moonlit landscape of the ranch she'd come to love.

If she stared at it long enough, would she be able to memorize every detail to savor later? Of course, it would be a lot easier to memorize if her eyes would stop blurring with tears. She swiped at them with one hand, blinking her vision clear.

The music Marta played in the kitchen blasted outside for a brief second, when the patio door opened. The sound went quiet again just as quickly. She turned, instantly recognizing Gabe's strong physique outlined by the bright lights of the kitchen. He saw her and walked quickly over to the rail where she stood, carrying a large box in his hands.

"Hi," she greeted him, hoping her voice didn't betray her lonely mood. "How was your day?"

"Just fine." He set the box down between them and tipped her face up with one hand under her chin. "You're crying? Why? What happened?"

"I finished my painting."

Gabe searched her eyes, quirking a brow. "You finished it. And that makes you sad?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. But when he didn't speak she felt compelled to explain. "My job here is done. And I'm really proud of it. I think it's my best work yet."

"I'm proud of you, Lilly. You've been through a lot since coming here. And I think you know how I feel about that painting. I'm not letting it leave here." His thumb caressed her cheek, wiping the wetness away.

She smiled and lowered her lashes. "You'll have to discuss that with your dad."

"Yeah." He picked up the box. "I brought you something from town."

Her smile broadened. She balanced her wineglass on the railing and accepted the box. "What is it?"

"Open it up. I think you'll like them."

Lilly lifted the lid off the box and peered inside. She pushed several layers of tissue paper aside and revealed a pair of ladies' cowboy boots. There was just enough moonlight to see a fine, rose and thistle pattern carved into the leather.

"Oh my God. They're beautiful! For me?"

He chuckled. "Of course. I know how much you missed the others you had. And you really shouldn't be riding in sneakers."

She traced the pattern with her fingertip. "That's so sweet. Thank you, Gabe. But I don't know how much riding I'll be doing."

He cocked his head at her, his expression curious. "Why not?"

"I guess I could rent a horse to ride in Central Park. They have a stable."

Gabe crossed his arms over his chest and sighed, the sound coming quick and impatient. "In Central Park? What's wrong with riding out here?"

"I love riding out here. But I'm going home, back to the city. Obviously I can't take Dancer with me."

"Is that what you want? To go back to your old life?"

She put the lid back on the box and hugged it to her chest. "What choice do I have? My job is done, I have to move on to the next one."

"Christ almighty!" He sucked in a tight breath and blew it out hard. "You do have a choice, Lilly. You can paint here. There are a million views you haven't seen yet. Don't you think you'd find enough here to keep you busy?"

Her gaze shifted from his to the magical landscape that glowed under the rising moon. "Yes, I could paint here forever. I've thought the same thing myself. But..."

"But nothing." He stole the box out of her grasp and set it back down. Then he took her hands and clasped them together inside his. "Lilly. If you don't know this already, I don't know which one of us is the greater fool. I love you. I've loved you since the first night I saw you on that terrace. Marry me."

Her heart skittered to a stop. She felt faint. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

His hands tightened around hers. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

An ocean of fresh tears sprang from her eyes. She moved her jaw for several seconds, trying to work past the tightness in her throat, past the glorious realization that he loved her. "Um. Yes."

The concerned look in his eyes softened. "Yes?"

She threw her arms around his neck and rained wet kisses on his face. "Oh God, yes! I love you, Gabe. I love you so much."

Evening Star  
*by Rita Sable*

"Good. Because I love you so much it hurts. The pain only goes away when I have you in my arms."

Lilly searched his eyes. She sniffled. "Then don't ever let me go, cowboy."

He kissed her long and hard. "Never. You're mine, Lilly-love. Mine."

**The End**



### **About the Author:**

Born in Heidelberg, Germany, to a military family, Rita Sable spent her entire childhood moving from one European country to the US, and back again. She attributes her avid wanderlust and love of travel to the frequent moves.

A voracious reader since kindergarten, she wrote and illustrated her first book at age nine, which her mother keeps to this day. In High School, a friend loaned her a romance novel, which opened up a whole new world of mystery, hot romance, and handsome alpha males she couldn't resist.

A lifelong animal lover and avid horsewoman, her earliest aspirations were to become a veterinarian, or an artist. In college, she toyed with writing her first romances and quickly shelved the idea when a friend said they were 'nice'. She didn't want her stories to be considered nice. Her passion for art became her focus and she graduated from Kansas State University with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art.

Today, she's married to her college sweetheart and they live in the northern suburbs of Detroit, Michigan with three dogs and two horses. Rita has a full-time job with an Automotive Supplier and aspires to a full-time writing career ... someday soon.

Rita welcomes readers' comments and suggestions for new stories. You can write her at: [ritasable@yahoo.com](mailto:ritasable@yahoo.com)

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