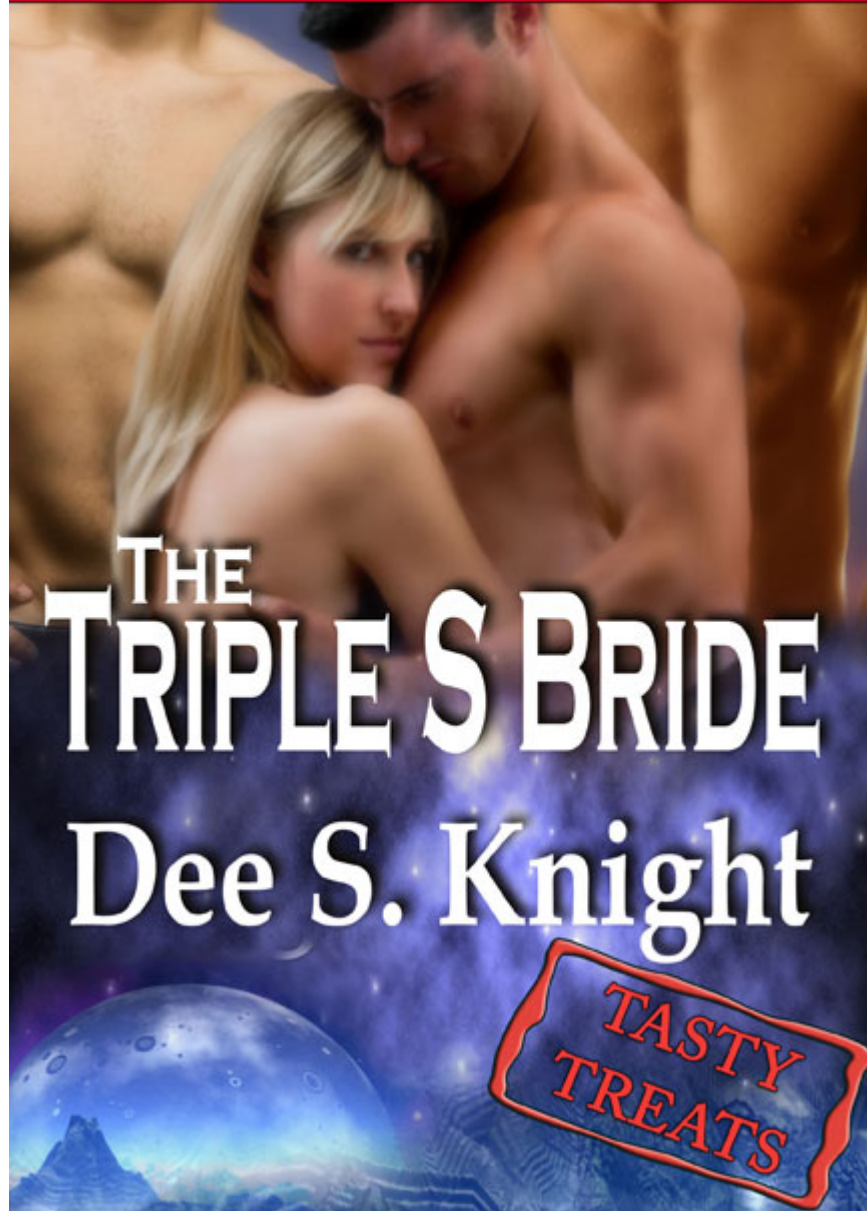


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THE TRIPLE S BRIDE

Tasty Treats

Dee S. Knight

MENAGE AMOUR



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DEDICATION

With thanks to my Siren friends for their advice and time, especially Jenny Penn, Amber Carlton and Raina James. I'm proud to be among you!

And as always, with love and thanks to the man who's been my own special hero since 8th grade, Jack.

THE TRIPLE S BRIDE

Tasty Treats

DEE S. KNIGHT

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Chapter 1

"Do you need help with your bags, ma'am?"

Sabina Volt looked up into the earnest young face of the transporter steward. He set her two duffel bags beside the seat, retrieved from the storage closet assigned to her. Once petrified of stepping aboard a plane or shuttle, Sabina now wished she could hide in the cabin and avoid disembarking. She no longer had that option—she had to get off.

She shoved to her feet. "No, thanks. These are all I have." A glance up the aisle showed an empty cabin. Though the young man's face showed no impatience, he probably wished she'd get her sorry ass in gear so he could also leave.

The steward politely stood aside so she could follow the flashing green lights embedded in the floor leading to the hatch. Dragging her feet as much as possible, dread building with each step, she made her way.

How did she end up here? It had been sheer madness signing a contract as a mail-order bride to a man she didn't know in order to escape a man she knew all too well. But the remaining ache from her

nearly-healed broken ribs proved that most any action would be better than staying on Earth as Kevin Groman's punching bag.

"Thank you for flying with us," said another steward at the hatch.

"Sure," Sabina muttered. Hopefully, she wouldn't soon fly with them or anyone else. Not back to Earth, at least, or anywhere near her former fiancé.

She took a deep breath, eyeing the length of insulated portable walkway connecting the shuttle to the terminal.

You've come this far. Don't turn tail now.

"It's going to be all right," she muttered. "Buck up."

The lights in the terminal stung her eyes, and after the quiet of the shuttle the noise struck her like a living thing. Comm sets dotted the walls every fifty feet or so, all sending out the latest news from Earth at top decibels. Dozens of people, mostly men and shuttle crews, stood around watching the sets or holding shouted conversations over the din. She blinked and stood a moment, adjusting to the new environment.

Then she saw him. Or at least, the cowboy with crossed arms who leaned insolently against the check-in desk sure looked like Walter Sheridan. She stared at his hologram often enough to have his features memorized, yet the man watching her wasn't exactly what she expected.

His face looked sculpted from stone, with a squared chin and sharp cheekbones. Wives' tales claimed smiling caused wrinkles, but no tell-tale lines marred this man's face. He had the coloring of someone with brown hair, but a sweat-stained, dusty cowboy hat hid everything north of his brows. When their gazes met, his eyes gave her pause. Green as late spring fields depicted in laser paintings, they were also penetrating and unforgiving. This man wouldn't trust easily or give any quarter.

Like Kevin.

Oh, God. She couldn't breathe. For a panicky moment, she thought she might pass out.

Turn around! Get back on that shuttle. Make them pry you out if need be.

She swung back toward the door only to find it locked. Fanning her face with her hand, she fought nausea and the dots swimming in her vision. Coming here had been a mistake, a horrible mistake.

Run! Anywhere would be better than—

"Are you okay?"

She didn't look but knew instinctively who stood beside her and took her elbow. He firmly guided her to a chair. When she sat, he forced her head between her knees.

"Breathe," he ordered.

"I'm fine," Sabina said at last, and she did feel better, though a little silly. Millions of miles separated her from Kevin. It took months of beatings, but she finally found the courage to yank back her life. Her method of escape might prove strange and impulsive, but she didn't care. As long as coming here didn't mean jumping from the solar roaster into the core generator.

Please don't let Walter be like Kevin.

With her head down, she couldn't help but notice the dust covering his boots and the hems of his worn jeans. *This* was the way he came to meet his new bride? The lack of care on his part didn't bode well. She chose this planet for its distance from Earth and Kevin, thinking her former fiancé would never find her here or think it not worth the trouble and expense to come for her. She had to stay, she *had* to. Yet if Walter took so little care when coming to meet his potential wife, what did it say about his *wanting* a wife?

"I'm fine," she repeated, then added, "Thanks." Reluctantly, she looked up. And up. Warm pools of emerald colored eyes stared back with a hint of worry.

His shirt wasn't in much better shape than his jeans and boots. A threadbare collar topped a dull khaki-colored shirt, almost completely faded. Spots of rust-red plaid marked the fabric here and there. He'd

rolled up his sleeves, showing muscled, tanned forearms sprinkled with light-colored hair.

"Are you Sabina Volt?"

She nodded.

He stared a moment longer, examining her face. He must have agreed that she was better because he said, "I'd about given up on you bein' on the transport. Everyone else who got off is long gone." He scooped up her bags and took a few steps away before stopping to turn around and look. His gaze softened. "You comin', or do you need another minute?"

In that instant, she knew this man was nothing like Kevin. Kevin wouldn't have given her a moment's thought. Sabina's stomach stopped its loop-de-loops, and her head quit spinning. Standing, she said, "Before we go, I'd just like to be sure of who you are."

He took in a breath and huffed it out. "We don't have time to waste pullin' out papers. You have my hologram. You should know I'm Walt Sheridan. Your future husband." He stared and waited, as though letting that sink in. "Now my truck's parked outside, and the sooner we get going the better."

"Well, I'm sorry," she said as she rushed to try to match his long strides. "I didn't know you'd be in such a big hurry." The terminal was huge, but at this pace Sabina expected they'd be wherever he parked in seconds. "Can you slow down?"

"If I have to." He cast a quick look down at her. "The thing is, the law being what it is on this planet, if you leave anything unattended for too long folks tend to think it's theirs."

His stride lengthened again, leaving Sabina with the idea he always moved this fast. She sighed.

Speed. Not a great trait in a lover.

Well, there were worse things than not being satisfied during sex. Much worse.

"How many other bags do you have?"

"None. You're holding all my worldly belongings right now."

He stopped short. Like applying reverse thrusters to a speeding shuttle trying to stop on an asteroid pad, he lurched forward, quick-stepping to keep from falling flat on his squared-off chin. He held up the two duffels with one hand.

"This is *it*?" She nodded. A frown marred his chiseled face. "We're getting in that truck and we aren't stopping until we're at the ranch. There won't be any place to shop once we're home."

"That's fine," she said. "I don't need anything more than what's in those cases."

"Okay. Just so you understand." He started off again, swerving around a man tugging on a bag packed way too full before slowing down so she could catch up. "Look," he said. "See those big doors down there?" He pointed to what looked like a mile of carpet that ended at huge double doors. "Just keep on and go through them and I'll meet you out there. I'll be in a dark green truck."

"You're *leaving* me?"

Walt opened his mouth and then shut it, staring over her shoulder. His brows bunched together and his mouth eased into a frown.

"What is it?" Sabina turned but saw only a Comm screen on the wall behind her displaying a newscast.

Walt made a survey of the concourse as though searching for someone before gazing at her once more. "It'll be faster if I go ahead. I'll stow your gear and make sure everything's okay with the truck and supplies and then meet you outside the terminal." Concern marked his eyes. "Don't waste any time, hear? Just come on down to those doors and outside. Can you do that?"

Of course she could do it. She just engineered an escape from pure evil and flown light years on her own. A genus-five level idiot could walk down a shuttle terminal concourse alone.

She shrugged. "Go ahead. I'll be along."

He pointed at her. "Promise me you won't dawdle. Keep your head low and don't talk to anyone. I'll be right outside."

"I promise."

Without waiting for more from her, he took off. Sabina stared at his retreating back. "This is just great," she said in a low voice. Fine. Walt could wait a few extra minutes. After months of confinement traveling to C8282, she needed time to stretch her legs and savor her victory over Kevin. Sweet freedom dispelled the fear that plagued her until she boarded the shuttle and lightened the uncertainty of her future with Walter Sheridan.

Stopping beside an Earth-style coffee shop, she inhaled, letting the aroma of the fresh-brewed beverage fill her senses. "What would it hurt if I took a minute or two for a cup?" she murmured. She stepped up to the storefront counter beside a man in shuttle uniform and laid fifteen Galactic dollars on the counter.

"I'll be right with you," the woman behind the counter said, giving Sabina a casual glance. Then her gaze sharpened. She focused on something behind Sabina and then shifted back.

Sabina turned to see what held the woman's interest and found her own image staring back from a Comm screen. Granted, the photo didn't look exactly like her. She was slightly heavier in the picture, and her hair was her natural dark brown. In the noisy terminal she couldn't hear the commentator's voice, but she easily read the large letters scrolling under her picture.

"The search continues for Citizen Carolyn Harding, who faces criminal charges in Earth's World Court for theft and the attempted murder of Kevin Groman, governor of US Central. Anyone with information regarding Citizen Harding should contact their local planetary law enforcement. Do not approach. Citizen Harding is considered dangerous."

Only the support of the counter at her back kept Sabina upright. Her heart raced and her knees felt like soy noodles after solar softening. If her lungs would fill with air, she might find the wherewithal to walk away, but for the moment she stood frozen.

Sabina knew Kevin's anger over her leaving would push him to search, but after the times she mentioned her fear of flying, she didn't

think he would extend the investigation to beyond Earth. Nor had she anticipated being labeled a criminal, not for attempted murder, at least. That she took enough money to make good her escape didn't bother her. Kevin's twisting self-defense into attempted murder did.

She turned back in time to see the woman behind the counter hang up a Comm phone. "I can help you now," she said, smiling and ignoring the man ahead of Sabina. "If you don't know what you want, take your time." Her gaze flicked nervously from Sabina to the concourse. The shuttle crewman whose place in line had just been forfeited turned to examine Sabina.

If the waitress recognized her, security could be rushing to arrest her right now, while she waited to buy a stupid cup of coffee. And by skipping over the crewman the woman brought Sabina even more unwanted attention.

Her brain wouldn't function. "I...uh, I'm not sure what—"

"There you are." Walt's voice fell over her like warm bathwater. His arm braced her waist, giving her strength. "Women," he said to the crewman. "All we men ever seem to do is wait for them. Come on, honey," he said, easing Sabina away from the counter, "we have coffee at home." He picked up the bills Sabina had placed on the counter.

"But wait." The woman behind the counter leaned out, looking toward both ends of the concourse. "We're offering a free cup to all travelers from Earth."

"Since when?" the shuttle crewman groused at the same time Walt said, "She didn't come in from Earth."

"No?" the woman asked, staring at Sabina.

"No. We came to meet a friend from J90." He moved his arm from her waist to drape her shoulders. "Thanks for the offer, but we have to be on our way. Come *on*." He directed this at Sabina.

With his help, she managed to put one foot before the other. He pulled her close, forcing her head lower. "Take it slow and easy, as though nothing's wrong," Walt advised.

"I thought you were worried about your truck." Her soft-spoken words struck her as inane, considering the charges leveled against her and that her face covered Comm devices all over the universe.

"I can worry about more than one thing at a time. Almost there," he murmured encouragingly.

And then they passed through the air gate doors. Sabina felt she walked onto a holographic movie set. Hover-cars and trucks jockeyed for position alongside horse-drawn wagons, and men in chaps and cowboy hats nudged cattle into pens.

"What are all those cows doing in a city?"

Walt opened the door to a dark green hover-truck. "Git on over," he snapped at a dog occupying the passenger's space. With a slow blink and slap of his tail on the leather, the dog lumbered to his feet and plopped down on the driver seat. Walt practically shoved Sabina inside the truck. "The slaughter house is beside the shuttle terminal so the cattle can be shipped as soon as processin' is complete." He slammed the door and hurried to the driver's side. Pushing the dog over, he climbed in.

"You mean all those cows will be killed?" She couldn't keep the horror from her voice.

Walt started the truck and then turned to stare at her. "What do you think we do up here? We raise the cattle that supplies Earth with its beef. Ever eat a hamburger or steak?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then you have C8282 to thank." Making no more than a low hum, the hydrogen-powered vehicle lifted a few inches off the road surface. Walt smoothly accelerated into traffic. "There's no law against killing cattle, you know. Or *attempting* to kill them."

Sabina gulped. So he saw the Comm reports. Yet he came back to find her in the terminal. With his help, she made it past security. What now? Would he continue to protect her, a woman wanted for theft and attempted murder? Or did he plan to turn her in, but in his own time?

Once they consummated the marriage and fulfilled the contract, Walt might find it harder to send her back, but he could void the agreement at any time. She was wanted by the authorities and used a false name and papers to get to C8282. Her right to stay on the planet virtually disappeared the moment her image came on the Comm screens. She needed to make it as hard as possible for him to give her up, whatever that meant, whatever he demanded.

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" He made turn after turn, smoothly maneuvering around horses and hover-craft alike.

What could she say, I'm innocent and the report has it all wrong? Walter Sheridan didn't know her from an HP2009m atom and had no reason to believe her. Besides, she wasn't technically innocent. She couldn't prove the money she took from Kevin's safe was the amount he confiscated from her. Who would believe her?

"Nice truck," she said, changing the subject. "It's different from anything I've seen on Earth."

Walt frowned but he kept on going. "Made for here," he said, wasting not a syllable to pleasantries. After a brief, piercing glance, he kept his eyes on the road.

* * * *

You have a surprise coming, lady. I'm better at uncovering secrets than you are at keeping them.

Walt drove away from the shuttle terminal as fast as he could without attracting attention. At this point, he wasn't sure who exactly he had in the truck, but he certainly knew that Sabina Volt and Carolyn Harding were one and the same. What had she stolen? Who was this Kevin guy she supposedly tried to kill?

He cut his gaze to the passenger seat. She rested her head against the seat back, her hands in her lap. She didn't seem nervous or scared now, not as she had when he found her at the counter in the coffee

shop, and sure as hell not the way she looked when she walked off the shuttle and saw him for the first time. Her eyes showed real fear then.

He'd been prepared to accept the mail-order bride he purchased. Even like her, he hoped. But he hadn't put any real stock in having a woman on the ranch. It was just...time, he'd thought. Time for his brothers, Charlie and Dan, to settle in now that that they were grown. Time to start a family and make the place where they lived a home, and for all that they needed a wife. One woman who would fulfill their needs. Walt wasn't willing to part with more money than the expense of one bride, and besides, more than one woman in a house might cause problems.

He forced himself not to expect much, to remember having a woman around was only for practical purposes. But when Sabina stepped off the shuttle, he had to compel himself to breathe. The picture sent by Intergalactic Brides didn't do her justice. The color of her hair reminded him of honey. Not flashy with outlandish color or twisted into a sophisticated style, it lay over her shoulder in a neat braid, gleaming with vitality. Her eyes had been wary and questioning, but large and sky blue. Her tits wouldn't fill his hands because his paws were so damn big, but he could have spanned her waist without stretching his fingers much at all. No makeup hid the fine lines of her face.

She wore tight jeans and high-heeled boots, temptation standing at a smidge over five-and-a-half feet tall. Walt immediately pictured her flat on her back, jeans off, boots on, and her braid fisted in his hands while he fucked her senseless. The fantasy hadn't let go of him yet. A god of sex created the woman, no doubt about it.

He still didn't know the cause of the terror that filled her blue eyes, but he aimed to find out. He wanted to kill whoever or whatever put it there. Emotion that strong wasn't common for him—at least, he wasn't used to showing it—so he tamped it down and stored it away until he could safely pull it out to examine alone on the range.

The role of protector came easily to Walt. When his mother died, he immediately stepped up as mother, father, disciplinarian, and example to his brothers, then fourteen and ten. He decided their best future lay in emigration to one of the planetary enterprises, and cattle ranching struck a chord in him.

Since their arrival on C8282 eleven years ago, Walt hadn't stopped doing whatever it took to make the ranch prosperous. Lately, Charlie's restlessness made Walt realize the boy was grown. He needed a woman. Hell, Dan did, too.

He glanced at his passenger again. Sabina exceeded all of their wish lists as far as her physical appearance. He hadn't counted on her being in trouble with the law, though. She didn't *look* like a thief, and no way in hell would he believe she tried to kill anyone. Her earlier vulnerability and fear rang true with him. When she exited the shuttle, she hadn't been afraid of being caught, she'd been afraid of *him* and he had no idea why. Could that fear have anything to do with her trouble on Earth?

Sabina's beauty proved a pleasant surprise. That she hid more than her share of mystery added a bit of spice to the mixture.

Walt pulled on the wheel, raising the hover truck and sending it forward at half-mach speed. He aimed the craft for the ranch, but where he and Sabina would end up was anyone's guess.

Chapter 2

Since he drove as fast as he walked, Sabina hardly had time to form an impression of Harken City before they reached the outskirts. Just when she thought they left civilization behind, Walt made a sharp turn into a recharge station.

Like shards of the green haflite mined on Sharone61, his eyes pierced her defenses, examining her face and making her feel he discovered every crime she committed in order to reach C8282. She fought against squirming in the seat and gripping her hands. What did Walt intend on doing?

Surely he didn't plan to help her escape the authorities totally? Coming to her aid in the shuttle terminal was one thing. He might explain whisking her out of the building if he handed her over soon afterward. But harboring a fugitive indefinitely put him squarely on the wrong side of the law and at risk of arrest. What did this surprising man have in mind?

"Are you ready for a break?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks."

"I'm going to recharge the truck's hydrogen cell. The relief station's over there, around the corner. You should use it because we have a few hours ahead of us. But don't dawdle. I don't plan to be here long." Climbing out, he slapped his thigh. "Come on, Wrangler," he said, and waited for the dog to jump out before shutting the door and striding off.

Happy at being free from his gaze, Sabina hurried to the restroom. Afterward, she stood beside the building looking over what had to be the most barren landscape ever created. Years ago, when it became

painfully clear that Earth's soil and water had grown too polluted to produce enough food to feed an overpopulated planet, the central government decided to colonize C8282. Homesteaders carved out ranches for cattle, sheep, and even chickens, and special farms for crop production. Yet how anything, plant or beast, survived on the arid, bare plains she saw before her, she had no idea.

Finally ready to continue, she stepped around the corner. "Oh my God." Her heart skipped a beat, and she fought back a sob. The truck wasn't there, not at the charging pole, not parked. She looked at the empty sidewalk in front of the building's main door. Had he left her alone without even the few things she managed to bring with her from Earth?

"He couldn't have left me, he just *couldn't!*" Or maybe he brought her here, out of the city, in order to hand her over to a different law officer, someone he knew. Maybe he hoped for a reward or planned to blackmail her in some way away from the city where she could have found help more easily.

She didn't *know* Walt, but she began to form a good opinion of him after he helped her out of the terminal. And didn't that show her? She couldn't afford to trust anyone. Like an Earth turbine at the end of the oil era, hope slowed and died.

"Ready?" His rumbling, deep voice came from behind her.

She whirled on him. "You're here!"

"Sure. Where did you think I was?"

Relief engulfed her. She gulped and slowly blinked. "I-I thought...Never mind." A deep breath settled her nerves. "You nearly scared me to death."

His expression revealed nothing of his thoughts. He simply pointed to the far end of the recharge station. "I'm parked over there. I came to find out what was taking you so long."

"Oh. Well, thanks."

"You're welcome. I picked up some food and a space cola."

She did an about-face and started walking to hide her astonishment. A man who planned to relinquish his prisoner to the police didn't buy her food and a fizzy soft drink. "That was very nice. Thank you," she said over her shoulder.

"It's only beef jerky, but it'll sustain us until we get home. You can have something more filling then." He helped her into the hover-truck and then climbed back behind the wheel. The dog gave her a baleful stare, then rubbed the top of his head against Walt's leg and closed his eyes.

Walt took the controls. Seconds later they barreled down the road so fast she thought even Jasper's Comet would have had a hard time catching them.

Sabina stared at the barren landscape flashing by. Walt's lack of conversation allowed worry to bubble up from the back of her mind. Squelching it proved impossible. The knot in her stomach didn't come from hunger, it arose from fear of what Walt knew and what he would do. Maybe she should simply tell him the whole story and trust in her instincts about the man.

Or maybe you should just have sex with him as soon and as often as possible and hope that will be enough to make him want to keep you.

Even if someone recognized her picture, surely Kevin wouldn't come out here to claim her. She glanced at the scenery again, unchanged for almost an hour now.

After all, this might not be the end of the universe, but you can see it from here.

Of course, Kevin doesn't have to come himself.

The thought haunted her. All he had to do was ask for assistance from the local sheriff. As long as her picture was splashed all over the Comm devices, she would spend her days looking over her shoulder.

Enough with the silence. It let her mind wander to events she couldn't control.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Sabina's stomach twisted and groaned in a way she didn't think jerky—whatever that was—would help.

Walt leaned forward and cast a glance at the sky with its two suns. One hung about halfway between five o'clock and the horizon, the other a little behind it.

"Night will be here before we know it."

"Yeah," she prodded, "and...?"

He gave her a quick look. "I'd rather not be caught out here after dark."

Chills skittered down Sabina's back. If someone as big and strong and obviously solid as Walt didn't want to be out after daylight, what must the night hold?

* * * *

Sabina had no concept of time, but two or three hours must have gone by. Except for a view of distant fences now and then, and once, an expanse of green crops, the sterile landscape remained unbroken. Her attempt at conversation failed. Walt provided terse answers when she tried asking him about the ranches and the land. He kept one hand on the wheel and the other scratching Wrangler's ears. The dog turned on his side to lay his head in Walt's lap, pushing Sabina away.

Dusk fell and still they continued. Hunger turned to nausea and then passed. Walt reached behind the seat and brought back a thin leather thong. He held it out.

"Jerky?"

She refused. Shrugging, he ripped off a chunk with his teeth and fed it to Wrangler. He tore off more and chewed until she thought his jaw would lock. Now, leather or not, she reconsidered his offer. Swallowing anything would fill the empty feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Her hand against the window, Sabina felt the effect of the cooler evening air through the glass. The planet's second sun hung low on the horizon on her side of the truck, while thin light from a small moon bathed Walt's side. She wished they had already reached the ranch. Maybe then she could breathe and believe in her escape. But more, she wished Walt would break his silence and talk. Even an interrogation into her past would be better than nothing. Sabina opened her mouth to ask for a strip of jerky when the truck slid sharply to the left.

"Fuck!" Walt's white-knuckled grip on the wheel matched the vehemence of his word.

It wasn't what she expected, but at least he finally voluntarily said something. "What's happened?"

"The right fan's out."

The problem didn't sound serious, but Walt's expression and his previous comment about being out after dark caused a tiny knot of concern to tighten in her chest.

The hover-truck landed hard, skidding to the left and spinning. When it stopped, Sabina stared out at scenery they already passed. "This can't be good."

"Smart girl," he muttered. He cut a look toward her before giving the darkening sky an appraising glance. "The truck has a fan in the back and two smaller ones on the sides. They propel the vehicle forward and to the left or right. If one of the side fans doesn't work, the truck slides instead of turning."

Okay. "I don't understand the difference," she said.

He sighed. "One way it works and the other way it doesn't."

That she could understand. "Can you fix it?"

"Don't know."

The sun dipped farther below the horizon. Weak moonlight did nothing to illuminate the area except for lending the brown, cracked land a faint silver hue.

Walt reached behind the seat again and pulled up a Taysaure 860. The weapon had a short barrel that extended beyond an action pump. The trigger rested under the pump, and the stock fit against the shoulder.

"Nice weapon," she said. "Isn't the stock longer than normal?"

Surprise showed in Walt's eyes. "What do you know about the Taysaure?"

"I taught high school." When that didn't seem to satisfy him, she added, "You haven't been to Earth in a while, have you?" He shook his head. "Then you don't know the extent things have changed. I have students who routinely bring guns to school. Competition is high for everything. Shootings are common."

Again he fixed her with his emerald gaze. "To answer your question, I had this gun fitted for me, and the stock *is* longer." He clenched his jaw and checked outside the windows. "I'm going to see if the problem is something easy. Stay inside the truck."

"I'd like to stretch my legs. I'll come with you."

His expression hardened. "Stay in the *truck*, I said. Don't get out for any reason, no matter what. Do you understand?"

They faced each other across the width of the tooled leather bench seat, Walt's sternness like a stone rendition of a man and Sabina feeling like Mt. Lucius, Earth's newest volcano, ready to erupt. Fatigue and hunger almost had her snapping back, "You gonna *make* me stay in the truck?" But before she could get it out, he nodded as though she agreed with his high-handed command. He exited the truck, Wrangler right behind him.

Sabina shook with the need to control something in her life. Kevin's demands and cruelty forced her to give up her independence and a job she loved to live on a godforsaken planet with a man she didn't know. Women lost all rights after marriage. Now it seemed Walt wasn't shy about assuming his place as her master even before they had sex and completed the contract issued by Intergalactic Brides.

"Ohh, that man." She crossed her arms and stared out into the growing darkness. Sounds came from the back of the vehicle.

Walt talked to Wrangler almost non-stop. "Guess he would have kept up a conversation if I were a dog," she grouched, thinking of the last few hours when they hadn't exchanged a word.

Still, she shouldn't complain. Though he hadn't been Mr. Congeniality, he also hadn't been mean. When he smiled, he was ravishingly handsome, and—big thing, this—he had not turned her in, though surely he saw her face on the shuttle Comm screens. By all rights, she should be sitting in jail right now, waiting for her trip back to Earth.

A stream of light from a hand torch danced across the roadbed at the back of the truck. Moonlight bounced off the metallic fan shroud when Walt removed it. A thump told her he set it against the bumper. An automatic screw remover whirled at the back of the truck.

"This is silly, she said, reaching for the door handle just as a shrill scream rent the evening.

"Goddamn it!" Walt's voice rose over the shriek. Wrangler erupted into sharp barking. The torch went out. The tailgate slammed shut and the dog's noise became a frenzied howl from inside the confines of the truck bed.

Sabina heard the *tkk-tkk-tkk* of the Taysaure 860 and something hit the truck hard.

Then there was nothing.

Chapter 3

Wrangler's shifts between howls and barks sounded even more distraught. Now, though, no reassuring response came from Walt.

Sabina couldn't speak, couldn't move. Her breath came fast and shallow. In contrast, her mind slipped into slow mode. Should she get out to investigate? Walt told her to stay in the truck *no matter what*. But what if he lay outside, hurt, maybe dying?

I don't know him. I'm not sure I even like him.

Her fingers, suddenly finding the will to move, began a furious tattoo on her jeans.

Don't be a selfish bitch. Besides, you can't drive this thing. You'll die out here without Walt.

She tried to think, tried to calculate the odds of coming through the experience in one piece if Walt lay dead and whatever killed him waited for another morsel to emerge from the truck.

But what if Walt isn't dead?

Once more she reached for the door handle, slower this time. She stared hard into the mirror attached to her door and saw no movement. Maybe whatever attacked them had left.

Scrape...scrape...scrape.

The sound came from the driver side and moved away from the truck, but it meant the danger hadn't passed. Another scream filled the night, but no shots from Walt's gun answered it. Wrangler whimpered, and the truck shook with the dog's frenetic jumping from side to side at the rear of the enclosed truck bed.

Sabina shrank onto the floorboard, trying to hide from whatever made the blood-chilling screams. She closed her eyes, wanting to believe that if she couldn't see it, it couldn't see her.

Why did you come here again?

Maybe she made a mistake. On Earth, she could have found a way to deal with Kevin. Maybe eventually she would have resorted to murder, not just attempted murder of which she stood accused. She could have dealt with that.

But she wasn't equipped to handle the unknown terrors of C8282. God knew, she had no place here, not with the taciturn man who may even now lay lifeless, and not with the monster screaming in the night. Why had she left the safety of a world she knew and understood? Earth at its worst didn't compare with this nightmare.

The driver's door swung open. Sabina screamed.

"It's me," Walt said. "It's just me." He slammed the door shut, pushed the lock switch and shifted the wheel into its recessed berth.

Sabina's eyes flew open. "Oh, thank God!" She unfolded and leapt across the seat. Tears streamed down her face, unnoticed. Walt caught her, losing his breath with an "Umph!"

"It's okay." He flipped on the interior light. "See? I'm okay." His faded plaid shirt had been removed, either before the monster's attack or after. A white T-shirt stretched across his broad chest and muscled shoulders. "Come here." He enfolded her, stroking her hair and pressing her face to the warm hollow between his shoulder and neck.

His voice rumbled deep and gravelly against her ear. His heart beat under her right breast, strong and true. Walt lived. She wasn't alone. She didn't have to battle whatever lurked outside the truck, didn't have to face the next day in the middle of nowhere by herself. Wrapping her arms firmly around his neck and straddling his lap, she laid her head on his shoulder and tried to control the terror that almost defeated her.

Warmth and comfort gradually took over. Having Walt Sheridan's arms around her felt very right. True, he offered few smiles and little

conversation, but with his muscles tightly bunched under her fingers, his big hands stroking her back, and his voice softly crooning in her ear, Sabina found a comfort long lost.

From the start, his attitude caught her off guard and occupied her mind. Now his body did the same thing. The unmistakable movement of his penis against her leg told her she could fulfill the contract right here, right now. As she would commit to submission and obedience, he would swear to protect.

Right now he seemed to be sheltering her from the law, but Sabina didn't kid herself. No contract, including the marriage contract from Intergalactic Brides, would prevent Walt from sending her back to Earth and her fate in the world courts if he wanted it. The best she could hope for was to entice him with her body and buy time. With luck Walt would come to like her. Maybe love her. Few men would send the woman they loved off to rot in prison.

She turned her head and kissed his neck, taking advantage of the moment. "Where's Wrangler?" she managed to ask.

"I left him in back so you'd have more room to sleep." He tilted his hips, fitting his erection into the vee of her thighs.

"I don't think I care to sleep." Sabina flattened her breasts against his chest, welcoming his heat, his heartbeat, his breath fanning loose tendrils of her hair. She inhaled his scent of dirt and sweat and man. Licking his skin, she tasted his essence. His sharp intake of breath struck her a chord deep in her belly. She'd climb under his skin if she could.

"I was so afraid for you."

"It's nice to know you care," he murmured, rubbing the length of his sex against the cleft of her thighs. His hands slid down her back, one cupping her butt while the other pulled her blouse out from the waistband of her jeans. "But it's okay. I'm fine. You're fine." Another rock of his hips. "You're more than fine."

Sabina took a deep breath. Eyes closed, she let relief wash over her. With his arms tight around her, she believed him. A few moments

before, images of a violent death filled her mind. Now she felt safe and warm. Reassured. How long had it been since she felt such things, and especially with a man?

Two minutes ago, she thought Walt dead. Now he prepared to prove in the most basic way that they were both very much alive. Emotion overtook her.

Leaning back, she reached below his T-shirt and pressed her hands against his warm skin. Cords of muscles rippled under her fingers. Walt unbuttoned his jeans, then grasped her wrist and edged her hand under the waistband.

"Touch me," he whispered.

"Yes." Her low tone barely registered. His cock lengthened, pushing into her hand even as he urged her farther under his clothing.

The head of his sex filled her palm, hot, moist, and twitching to be rubbed. Walt moaned. His obvious pleasure spurred her on. Her pulse quickened. She stroked the long, hard ridge of him, then stroked again, this time imagining him inside her, filling her with his heat and strength.

"Yeah, that's it," Walt encouraged. "Don't stop."

She wouldn't stop. Pure need and joy that she wasn't alone had her body demanding more. "Be sure to take your own advice."

* * * *

Walt nearly lost control. He found Sabina's lips and kissed her with all the pent up longing of a man who'd been without sex far too long. In the eleven years he and his brothers lived on C8282, he mostly worked off sexual tension on the ranch.

His trips to Harken City proved unsatisfactory, and now he knew why. Being with a whore in no way compared to having Sabina touch him or ride his cock, even through their clothes. He wanted her with something akin to pain since she stepped off the shuttle and now—Lord have mercy—she was *his*. As soon as they sealed the contract by

consummating the marriage, he could have her any time he wanted. In his mind's eye, he saw nights stretching out to eternity filled with fucking Sabina.

She moaned into his mouth, and he took charge, slipping his tongue between her lips and past her teeth into the hot, wet recess of her mouth. His brain ran through all the reasons why they should wait. They didn't know each other, didn't know if things would work. She was vulnerable and alone in a strange place.

And then there was the small matter of her arrest warrant on Earth. Quickly, he rejected every objection. On C8282, folks lived life by different standards than on Earth. He had no proof, but he thought there was more to the attempted murder claim than had been portrayed on the Comm.

Right now he couldn't concentrate on that. With her hot twat mere inches from his dick, he didn't give a flying fuck about what some guy light years away said about his bride.

Yeah, oh, God, yeah.

He thrust his tongue and pulled out, thrust and pulled back. Her soft sigh showed that he pleased her. She rubbed his cock harder, sending shockwaves through his body. In moments he'd be mindless with need. He kneaded her firm, round ass through her jeans, then used one hand to push up her bra and palm her nipple, already beaded and hard. If he pressed his finger against her clit or into her pussy, he knew he'd find her wet and ready. She was all woman. All for him. God, he wanted her.

"I thought you were dead," she blurted, betraying a hint of the fear she showed when he climbed back in the truck. Unfortunately, at that moment he lacked the strength to tamp down his libido and comfort her in a gentle, platonic way. He only hoped sharing his heat and passion would ease her concerns.

Her hand roamed over him, alternately rubbing and caressing. Which pleased him more he couldn't say, the almost innocent brushing of her fingers on his shoulder or her bold grip as she traveled

up and down his length. His close call with the versa didn't rank even in the top ten things on his mind.

"Versa," he managed to say. "Dead." God, her breast felt good, small but plump in his hand. He stroked her nipple with his thumb. She arched her back, pressing into him. More than anything, he wanted to lose himself in her. He pushed her away far enough to pull her blouse over her head, still buttoned. "Get you out of those clothes," he mumbled, seeing her breasts in the dim light at last. He cupped them, testing their weight, admiring their softness, softer than a grenett's coat. She trembled at his touch, and he about lost it.

"What's a versa?"

Her fingers furrowed through his hair, sending shivers down his back. He lifted her, fitting his mouth over her nipple and sucking. A fragrance struck his nostrils. Lilacs. She must have dabbed perfume in the deep dip between her breasts. *For me?* He liked the possibility.

The scent knocked him off kilter, throwing him into memories of Earth. Sweet God, making love to Sabina would be like—

He almost thought *heaven on Earth*, but long ago he left the notion of both places behind. A sense of rightness, of wholeness settled over him.

"What's a versa?" she repeated.

"What?" Walt fought the haze of lust to focus on her question. "Oh. They roam wild here. Mostly at night." He dropped kisses along her jaw line. "Very dangerous. But don't worry, I'll keep you safe."

"I believe you."

She said the words softly, but her tone showed she meant it. A place deep inside warmed with something other than lust, other than want and need. C8282 was dangerous in a way Earth wasn't. He knew a stranger to the planet would need his care, expertise, and experience, and he'd been prepared to provide it to Sabina as he would to any newcomer. This was far greater. His overwhelming desire to protect her surprised him.

He had pulled the versa carcass to the side of the road, and others would be coming to investigate, following the scent of blood. Instead of fucking, he should be keeping watch and making sure Sabina stayed safe inside the truck.

Too bad about that. Making her truly his sealed his role, made her part of his family. He wanted that more than he imagined he would.

"Don't worry," he said, "nothing will hurt you."

"I wasn't worried." She ran her thumb across his bottom lip. "Not now."

He took her thumb inside his mouth and sucked, all the while fumbling to unzip her slacks.

Staring at his mouth she licked her lips. "Let me," she said, eyes glazed. She slipped off his lap.

Walt heard a zipper and the rustle of clothes while he ripped off his T-shirt and pushed his jeans to his knees. His rod pulsed, aching for relief.

Seconds later, Sabina straddled him again. Immediately, she guided his throbbing cock to her pussy and sank onto it.

When she would have risen to her knees, Walt gripped her hips. It was keep her from moving or shoot off like an inexperienced kid with his first girl. Instead, he took a moment to appreciate what he held. Her blue eyes shone with desire. Back arched, her firm, round tits offered themselves to him and he took a sweet lick. Her body was perfect, absolutely perfect.

"It's a little late, but are you sure? This binds us, you know. If you've changed your mind, I'll put this moment aside." He had to say it just in case, but he hoped like hell she wanted this as much as he did.

She didn't speak with words. She rolled her hips over his, seating his cock and scraping her sex across his thatch of hair. Nothing she would have said could have made him any happier.

Chapter 4

Sabina had been a virgin until Kevin claimed her the night of their engagement announcement, saying she would be his soon anyway so why wait. She'd known him four months by then. By asking if she was sure, Walt showed her more respect and care after knowing her only a few hours. Add that to his bravery fighting that animal and his humility when he described it. He was a man totally unlike Kevin. She was safe, knowing in her heart Walt would fight the animal seeking her from Earth just as he had the versa. Quite by accident, she'd chosen her hiding place well.

The calluses dotting his fingers scraped the skin on her buttocks when he lifted her, then dragged her close to fall over him again. Every touch, each move added a layer of sensation to the riot of feelings already roiling inside her.

"You're so tight," he whispered.

Was that good? "I'm sorry," she said, suddenly afraid she displeased him in some way she didn't understand. For a panicky moment, she feared he found a reason to send her back. In the rush of getting away, she barely skimmed the contract. Had there been a clause stipulating displeasure with sex could end the agreement?

"God, no." He pushed up at the same time he pulled her down. Her clit rubbed against the base of his cock. A thundering wave of emotion built deep inside. She took a quick breath and then another as he lifted her over him again.

Her nipples swiped his chest. Flashes of exquisite pain along with intense pleasure flared from her sensitive tips to her core. An unfamiliar churning need consumed her. Unthinking, she stroked his

arms, his shoulders, his neck. She wanted to bite the tender place where his pulse pounded beneath her fingers. She wanted to kiss him, to suck his tongue and let him suck hers.

Pressing her mouth to his, she pushed her tongue into his mouth. He twisted his lips over hers, pulling her tongue farther into his hot recesses and sucking greedily. Like the sensory wave inside her, he sucked, pulled, lifted, dragged her to the point of no return. Just when she thought she couldn't take more without going mad, the wave peaked.

Everything about her tensed. She couldn't move or speak. Her pussy clamped and released, then quickly contracted again against Walt's sex. He pulled her tight. She felt his pulse and thought she felt his hot seed filling her.

"I take you for my wife," he ground out.

"I take you for my husband," she said, barely able to get out the words.

Moments later when he relaxed his grip, she fell to his chest, boneless.

"Thank you," Walt murmured into her ear.

He was thanking her? She never had experienced anything like that. Once, she came close to the start of the tension, the start of the build-up. But Kevin came and then pulled out, leaving her empty and wanting something she couldn't define. Sabina thought the fault lay in her, but if Walt appreciated her sexual ability—such as it was—then maybe she needn't shoulder all the blame for her past physical relationship.

"No, thank you. I've never felt that way before."

In the dim light from the moon hanging overhead, his green gaze examined her. "Don't you want to tell me something?"

She squirmed under his penetrating stare, thinking to move away.

"Careful," he warned. "It wouldn't take much for me to be ready to go again, and you're liable to be a little sore."

"Men can't do it more than once, can they?" Kevin told her they couldn't one time when she begged him to come back to bed and bring her to completion.

"I might surprise you," he said with that hint of a smile she noticed earlier at the airport. "Did *he* tell you that?"

"Who do you mean?" Panic filled her once more, something she knew all too well. The overwhelming sense of passion and rightness Walt just made her experience receded.

His gaze hardened. "I mean the man you're running from, the one you're accused of stealing from and nearly killing."

She didn't answer. If there could be a time to trust Walt, this would be it, after he sent her into orbit and brought her safely back. But she didn't know him well enough. He might be as honorable as she hoped, but Kevin proved what a bad judge of character she could be. Walt hadn't had time to fall in love with her yet, and until then she wouldn't allow herself to weaken toward him.

"I don't know what you mean."

Walt let out a breath. "Have it your way. For now." He lifted her off his lap and set her on the seat beside him.

Oh, God, had she angered him? Newfound pride warred with the desire to crawl to the other side of the truck cab. Distance saved her from being truly hurt once when she made Kevin mad. Was there enough space in here if Walt decided to take out his anger by slapping her for her stubbornness?

She didn't move away, but pride didn't keep her from twisting her hands in worry while Walt straightened his clothing. He reached behind the seat and pulled out another plaid shirt, this one in no better shape than the one he wore earlier.

He wrapped the soft material over her shoulders and nudged her down onto the seat, her head in his lap. "Get some sleep," he said.

Amazed, she struggled and failed to find a way to thank him. He flipped off the light, and in moments his deep breathing indicated he took his own advice.

Sabina watched the moon's arc across the velvety sky and wondered what the morning would bring.

* * * *

Sunlight poured through the truck windows when Sabina opened her eyes. It took a few moments to figure out that she lay on the front seat of Walt Sheridan's truck, covered with his shirt.

She stretched and noticed an ache in her upper thighs and between her legs. A delicious kind of ache that reminded her of how Walt made her feel when he moved deep inside, when he took her tongue and pushed her hard against him. Ache or no ache, she wanted that ride again. But the low rumble of male voices showed they had company.

The mirror next to her door revealed a repaired fan attached to the rear of the truck. Wrangler began barking, and someone slammed the tailgate shut. The voices came toward the front of the truck, and Sabina frantically tried to retrieve her clothes. Finally, she slipped into Walt's shirt, making sure it covered her lap.

"Morning," he said through the driver side window, giving life to her thoughts. He propped his elbow on the door and gazed at her through the glass. He had his hat on again, hiding his hair and shadowing his eyes.

She discovered last night that his hair was indeed brown, a rich, sun-burnished color, short and soft between her fingers and on her lips. The thought of where his mouth had been while she ran her fingers through his hair tightened her stomach with stirrings of desire.

Get a grip.

Then she saw another face peering in at her and she had to gulp. His face was round and soft compared to Walt's hard planes. His hair was also light brown, but covered his ears and hung in a shock of untidiness. The piercing green eyes gave away some kinship with Walt.

Walt pulled open the door and climbed behind the wheel. The other guy leaned in and held out his hand. Walt gestured with his thumb. "My brother, Dan. I called him this morning to bring out the parts for the fan. Dan, this is Sabina Volt."

She took his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too," he said back. "You weren't kidding, big brother," he said with a grin. His gaze swept her again. "And may I say Walt's shirt never looked as good on him."

"That's enough," Walt said gruffly. "Go on now. We'll see you at the house."

Dan laughed and winked at Sabina. "You aren't far now. Our other brother, Charlie, will make you a good breakfast."

A spasm of hunger gripped Sabina's stomach. "I look forward to that," she said, meaning it more than anything she said since exiting the shuttle.

Walt gave Dan a gentle shove and closed the door.

"Come on, boy," Dan called out. Wrangler woofed and ran to the two-seater Dan strolled toward. In seconds, he hovered and shot off. A little more slowly, she and Walt followed.

"Did you get some sleep?" Walt asked.

"Yes, thanks. How much longer to your house?" Shyness struck her. She sat half naked beside the man who shattered a barrier for her last night and she had no idea what to say to him. Did people talk about sex the morning after?

"Half an hour, give or take."

He kept his gaze aimed at the path in front of them. She waited for him to say more. He didn't. If Sabina thought what they shared would make a difference in his attitude, she was wrong. He remained as silent as when they first left the shuttle terminal.

She tried again. "So you have brothers."

He shot her a look, one that made her hot and desired. "Two. Dan's four years younger than me and Charlie's four years behind

him. He's still a kid, really, at twenty-one. You'll like them. I'm sure they'll like you."

"I'll do everything in my power to make them like me."

"You won't have to do much." He clammed up again, but the way he clamped his jaw and tapped his fingers on the wheel told her he wanted to say more.

"And?" she prompted.

"And nothing." A muscle in his jaw ticked. "How are you feeling after last night?" he asked suddenly.

She smiled. "Fine. Just fine."

He nodded. "Good. Dan and Charlie haven't had much experience, but they'll treat you right. We all will. It'll be fine." He sounded more like he tried to convince himself of something. Eyes straight ahead, he tapped the wheel like a drum. "Of course, I'm counting on having an extra pair of hands to help on the ranch. It's time Charlie took his place out with Dan and me out riding herd. But I'll make sure one of them stays home. You'll never be hurtin' for a man."

She twisted on the seat to face him. The leather grabbed then released the soft skin of her butt in a tantalizing way. What would Walt think if she reached over and touched his leg? He moved it and the muscle strained against his jeans. She imagined her legs over his, rubbing, squeezing.

One night and you've become wanton.

"I don't understand what you mean about never being without a man. Won't you be with me?"

"Well, not always. I have to take care of the ranch. But one of us will be there. The bride won't be lonely."

Foreboding niggled at the back of her mind. "But *you're* the groom, aren't you?"

He cast her a confused look. "I signed the contract, so technically I'm the groom."

"Technically?" A shocking thought occurred to her.

He spared her a quick glance. "You're my bride but you're wife to all of us."

Oh, God.

* * * *

Walt couldn't miss the look of hurt and then rage in her eyes. Hell, a blind man could see it.

"Why are you doing this?" Sabina whispered.

"What do you mean?"

She cleared her throat. "I'm sure Intergalactic Brides didn't know any of this."

"You don't know the options offered by that company. Sending a woman to be married to three men is one of the milder packages a person can buy."

Sabina closed her eyes. "I guess there had to be consequences of some kind, after all."

"Again, what do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"Damn it, Sabina, you're going to have to tell me about it sometime. Who is this guy? What did the Comm reports mean?"

Once again she turned away his questions.

"So, I'm supposed to—" She shook her head and stared out the window. "I'm supposed to be a wife to three of you, plus help on the farm and in the house. And for all that, I receive forty-five percent of what you paid Intergalactic Brides."

He nodded, relieved she understood the situation. "Right. Once I send word the contract is fulfilled, they'll forward the portion owed to you. I'm legally bound to put the funds into an escrow account. If we're still married after five years or if I die, the money is yours. If not, it's mine."

"The contract isn't geared much toward me."

He shrugged. "If you're happy, five years won't matter. And of course, the amount isn't huge. They deduct the cost of the items they sent with you." He shot a glance toward the back where her duffel bags lay.

He knew the agency supplied every bride with a wedding gown. Sabina and he skipped the wedding day and jumped right to the wedding night. Maybe they'd have another wedding night before he lit out for the range. On a bed this time, his bed.

It took no extra imagination to picture her beneath him, his cock deep inside her heat. She would make that little noise he loved when he pushed into her tight sheath and rubbed her clit, and she'd scream into his mouth when she came. Yeah, that's what he wanted, to feel her scream of passion while he filled her. The only reason he didn't race for home and his bed is that he wanted a little more private time before sharing her with his brothers.

He decided to be the one ending the silence for a change. "They also hold back what they paid for your shuttle service and anything you had to eat or drink on the trip. Plus they reimburse me for going into town to pick you up."

"Another man wanting my money."

"You want to explain that?" He frowned, not believing she'd answer.

"No." She pressed her lips together. "You have some nerve keeping any of my money for picking me up."

"I'll ignore that little snipe." He didn't spare her a glance this time. "I thought you were an educated person. Didn't you read the fine print?"

"No," she said quietly. "I was in a hurry." She seemed to be thinking. "The contract is with you, correct?"

Curious, he nodded. "I'm the head of the family."

"I want a few things guaranteed. There will be no sex if I say no. And..." She sucked in a deep breath. "I won't be hit, no matter how angry any of you get. I won't accept it."

"Good God! Just because we live in the wilderness doesn't mean we're animals."

"I just need that understood. I want my own room, my privacy."

"Damn it, woman, we aren't made of money." He sighed. "The house is adequate, but since you're technically marrying me, I'll agree to put a bathroom on my bedroom. We'll use it and leave the other one for Dan and Charlie."

"What about children?"

"What about 'em?"

"How will you know which of you is the father?"

That set him back. He gripped the wheel and turned toward his side window for a few seconds. Of course he planned that she would give them children. Desire for a family was one reason people married. But her blunt question had him picturing her belly full and heavy with a child. Did it really matter if his sperm put it there?

"Whoever the father is, they'll all be Sheridans. That's what counts."

He pointed ahead. "Here's the ranch."

Walt pulled up on the wheel, and they rose over the fence and the wooden sign designating the property as the Triple S Ranch. Fencing similar to that used on most of the ranches stretched as far as the eye could see in both directions. Walt's chest swelled with pride.

"It's about fifteen miles to the house."

And that means fifteen miles to my bed.

Chapter 5

Sabina noticed the change in scenery shortly after they passed over the gate. First brush appeared in scraggly bunches. Then a unique, towering species of trees appeared near towers of pipe with paddles connected, spinning for all they were worth. In the distance, grass swayed over the land in waves, a vast sea of green between the brown earth and sapphire sky.

"Those work like old-fashioned windmills on Earth. The paddles have solar panels for when there's no wind. One thing we don't have a shortage of is sunlight, but surface water isn't plentiful. We generate our own electricity and charge hydrogen cells," Walt said, pointing to the towers. "All our farm equipment is electric."

His voice vibrated with excitement. As furious as she was with the situation in which she found herself—three husbands!—she knew Walt didn't bear the brunt of the fault. That belonged to her, and she'd have to find a way to deal with it if she didn't want to risk the chance of rejection and being sent back to Earth.

"I thought you ranched. Do you farm commercially, too?"

"No, the farm is just for us. We're too far from a city to rely on anyone but ourselves. In addition to the cattle, we harvest our own hay for silage and grow our own food. The garden is Charlie's pride and joy. That's what you'll help with. Other supplies, like flour and sugar, we bring back from town when we have errands to run, like yesterday."

Had she been just one more chore on his list?

Pick up potatoes, coffee, bride.

No wonder he looked so disreputable at the shuttle terminal. He hadn't even attempted to knock the dust off his hat because she didn't matter.

With the increased plant life also came cows, and hundreds, maybe thousands of them roamed the flat plains.

"We started with five thousand acres of cleared land and five hundred head of cattle. Now we have two hundred thousand acres and nearly five thousand head."

Sabina's mouth dropped open. "How long have you been here?"

"Just over eleven years. That's why Charlie needs to be more involved." He pulled his hat farther over his eyes. "Don't worry. You'll be with him a lot, so he can show you how things are run here."

She decided to ignore the hint that she and Charlie would be together a good bit. "You've had to work hard to do all this in so short a time."

His jaw clenched and his hands tightened on the wheel. "It's been worth it."

"Say, how can your cattle wander around out here? What about those things around the truck last night?"

"Fences. When the power's on they can't claw through them, and they can't jump 'em." He cast her a quick glance. "That's not to say you're totally safe in a good enclosed space, so you need to stay alert. Being in the house is best. The garden area is double-fenced so it's good, and the barn is secure. *Never* leave the house after dark. In fact, don't leave it at all unless one of us is nearby, you hear?"

"I'm to be a prisoner?"

"I mean it, Sabina."

"I *heard*." After all he revealed about her marriage and the way he somehow managed to avoid touching her when she couldn't shake this feeling of pure want for him, why did being told to stay in the house bother her so?

"Just makin' sure," he muttered and pointed to a spot in the distance. "There's Charlie now."

Ahead and to their right, a horse galloped. Someone riding a short distance off waved a cowboy hat in the air as he made for a dot in the distance. The dot became what used to be called a ranch-style house on Earth. The cowboy drew up and jumped off the horse.

Butterflies took flight in Sabina's stomach. Here they were, the Sheridan house. Her home for the rest of her life. Or as long as Kevin didn't find where she fled.

"I hate to suggest this because I've been admiring the view every time my shirt shifts, but don't you want to finish getting dressed?"

"Oh, damn!" She completely forgot she sat beside him virtually naked. Jerking on her slacks, she asked, "Why do you use horses?" She'd ridden as a child and loved it.

"Up here you use what works best for any job. Hydrogen and electricity have their places, but for herding cows, nothing works better than a horse and good dog." He shot her another stern look. "The horses are for work, so don't plan to go off on any rides for the hell of it."

"I wouldn't *dream* of it," she drawled. "After all, I can't leave the house."

"Good girl," he said with that ghost of a smile she already recognized.

They stopped at the foot of the steps leading up to a railed porch. A plain, large building she took as the barn stood off to one side, and a patch of green on the left side indicated where the garden might be. Dan and a younger man descended the steps to open her door. Trying to stifle her nerves, Sabina looked up at the brothers.

The younger man shared the same eye color as Walt and Dan. He topped Dan by several inches, and muscles stood out on his arms. On Earth he'd have had his choice of women. With his hat set back on his head and a lock of blond hair carelessly fallen on his brow, he gave Sabina a boyish grin. She liked Charlie before she even met him.

"Are you ready?" Walt asked.

The time had arrived to meet her fate. *Honey, I'm ho-o-me.*

* * * *

Walt watched twenty-one-year-old Charlie hover over Sabina like a hargass before descending on a field of wheat. Hunger would have filled Charlie's eyes if he wasn't so damn entranced. Instead, the poor kid was doing everything he could just to capture her attention. Walt could hardly blame him.

Instead of introducing her to Dan and Charlie and then dragging her to the bedroom, like he wanted, Walt gave in when Charlie suggested Sabina might want a bite to eat. Then Dan insisted on coffee and asking her about what books she read. They doted on her as though she was a goddess instead of only a woman.

Yeah, right. Only a woman whose heat engulfed him and whose scent overwhelmed his senses. A woman he longed to fuck until the night's inky darkness morphed into brilliant sunlight. He gave in to his brothers' wishes because he and Sabina hadn't taken much time with each other before having sex. She deserved an opportunity to know Charlie and Dan before deciding if she wanted to fulfill the contract.

"More coffee, Miss Sabina?" Charlie stood beside her with the pot.

"Thanks, Charlie. I'd love another cup."

She smiled at Charlie the way Walt imagined her smiling at him. He remembered how her eyes changed to a dark, deep blue in passion and how brilliantly they sparkled when she looked at him after coming. He longed for that smile again, too.

Blushing, Charlie poured her coffee then sat down, chin propped on his fist, and stared, star-struck. Sabina sat at their kitchen table as though holding court. She reached out and brushed a lock of hair off Charlie's forehead. He looked likely to swallow his tongue at her touch.

On Earth Charlie would likely be married by now. The remoteness of the planet and predominantly male society of C8282 prevented

him—hell, prevented all of them—from meeting women. They all suffered from ineptitude when it came to the fairer sex. Sabina's presence would end that in short order. Knowing he gave her pleasure last night filled him with confidence already.

Walt shook away the memory of how it felt to be inside Sabina and wondered when this chat-chat session could be called to a close without appearing too needy.

At the same time she entranced Charlie, she easily asked Dan questions about the ranch. He answered with a breeziness that made it seem they knew each other forever. Where Walt thought Sabina treated Charlie like a little brother, she treated Dan like an equal, a friend. Dan had always been the reader and the dreamer of the family. He and Sabina had books, plays, and humor in common. They seemed to click. He tried hard to quell the jealousy rising in his gut, but it proved damn hard.

Walt had never seen his brother like this. Relaxed, a satisfied expression covered Dan's face as he listened to Sabina tell a story about her shuttle journey. He laughed and then leaned forward to give his undivided attention, never taking his eyes off her. In his own way, he appeared as besotted over Sabina as Charlie.

No, on closer inspection, Dan looked more like a versa who spotted his prey and plotted a course of attack. Shit. All the Sheridan men had lost their minds. After a few minutes of being petted, even Wrangler lay at her feet.

Sighing, Walt reached for the coffee pot and poured his own cup. Any envy he felt a minute ago dissipated. This easy conversation, this sense of family is what he dreamed of when he first decided to order a bride. Sabina exceeded every hope, fitting into their little group perfectly. If she could handle being wife to the three of them, she would find herself cherished and loved. He hoped she realized that. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Nothing much," Dan replied. Then with a sly glance at Sabina he added, "Samuel seems to have found his reason for living. Samuel's

one of our bulls," he explained. "He's mounting cows left and right. You can almost smell the sex in the air. We should have a good batch of calves next spring." His lazy smile and hooded eyes signaled his intention like a flashing, neon sign.

Sabina smiled back. "Samuel sounds like quite a specimen."

"Oh, he is. Like all the males on the Triple S."

Walt glanced at Charlie. Still staring at Sabina, he almost panted. The kid himself might not know anything about women, but his body certainly did and he was in a bad way. He didn't need Dan's innuendo to drive him into pain. "That's enough," Walt said gruffly.

Dan almost laughed. "I'm just sayin'—"

"*Enough*. Sabina didn't know she was comin' out here to live with three men."

Coffee splashed over the edge of Dan's coffee cup as it hit the table. "What?"

"She thought she was marryin' one man. Me."

Charlie's face fell, and Dan turned to her with an appraising look. "So what does that mean?" he asked her.

"I need a little time to adjust," she said.

Dan adopted a poker face, picked up his coffee and took a gulp.

Charlie said, "You aren't plannin' on leaving, are you?"

Walt heard the plea in his question. The kid had been only ten when their mom died and Walt moved them up here. Even before that, they rarely saw their mother. Walt tried to be all things to his brothers, but softness had gone by the wayside. The boys had to grow up fast and pull their weight. More than the others, Charlie needed a woman's gentle touch. Walt worried now the boy had mixed feelings about Sabina. His mind and heart wanted a mother while his body needed a woman.

Sabina reached out and cupped Charlie's cheek. "Charlie, let's not worry about it now, okay? Let's just see how things go."

He smiled. "We'll be good to you, Sabina. You'll grow to like us."

Sabina glanced at Walt. "I'm sure."

"The lady wants a bathroom. We'll add it on to my bedroom, where she'll sleep. Alone, until she says otherwise," he added.

"Interesting," Dan murmured. Then he studied Walt. "Is the contract sealed?"

Walt ignored him. "Charlie, you'll show Sabina the house and garden. Then you and Dan can dig out whatever you need from the supplies in the barn and get the bathroom added."

"Where will *you* be all this time, big brother?" Dan shifted his gaze from Sabina to Walt.

"On the range, where else?" Walt bit out, harsher than he intended. He wanted Sabina to stay and be a wife to all of them, and he wanted her to commit to it, especially after the fiery way she responded to him in the truck. But if she wouldn't promise to stay after seeing the stark need in Charlie's innocent eyes, maybe nothing they could say or do would change her mind. The possibility put him in a foul mood.

"And that's where you'd better get your ass, too, as soon as the bathroom is built." He shoved his chair back. "That's enough lollygagging. Come on and help me unload the truck."

Dan followed him out. "What are we going to do about Sabina's choice? I can't believe they didn't tell her."

"We're doing nothin' at all." Walt opened the back of the pickup truck. "She knows I hold the contract, and as of this morning she knows the three of us are the deal. She'll have to make up her own mind if she wants to stay or not."

"Jesus, Walt, we can't let her go. I mean, just look at the woman. Plus, she's intelligent and funny. At last there would be someone I could talk to about things other than cows and versa. And the way Charlie feels is written all over his face."

"It's not our call, it's hers."

"But you completed the contract."

Walt turned to face his brother. "Do you think for one minute if she wanted to go back I'd force her to stay with *that*?" He tossed the two duffels at Dan. "Here, these are Sabina's."

"This is all?" Dan queried, catching the two bags.

"I made sure she knew we weren't goin' to go runnin' back into town for her to shop."

"I'm sure your diplomatic phrasing put her right at ease." Dan hefted a twenty pound bag of flour and carried it and Sabina's bags into the kitchen.

Okay, so Dan was right. Maybe he hadn't been as tactful as he could have been with Sabina or as pleasant on the trip as he could have been. But ordering a bride had been almost a desperate measure. The ranch had grown too big for just him and Dan to manage, and Walt had plans to expand even more. It never occurred to him Sabina wouldn't know she came to live with three men. Perhaps he would have handled things differently otherwise.

"Or maybe not," he muttered, pulling tractor parts from the truck. Though the eldest, he didn't understand much more about how to treat a woman than Charlie. He only knew that a strong desire had built in his gut since he ordered a bride. At long last, he'd have a woman whenever he wanted. They would have a softer touch around the place and eventually children, something he didn't realize he wanted so much until the moment he made the deal with Intergalactic Brides.

But more than the vague desires he harbored waiting for his bride, from the moment he laid eyes on Sabina he wanted her fiercely, with a fire he'd never known. And that scared the spit out of him. He understood Charlie's longing, but there could be no comparison between their desire. Walt wanted Sabina as a grown, healthy man who already felt the searing heat of her touch. He hardly knew how he could stand leaving her at the ranch while he went out to check the outer fences.

"You gonna stand there daydreamin' or finish unloading that truck, big brother?"

Walt laughed, embarrassed at being caught. "Shut up, Dan." He handed off supplies for the house and put back the items for the barn. "I'll take these out to offload. Then I'm saddling Minnie and heading out."

"Aren't you going to say goodbye to your bride?" Dan smirked as he said it.

"What I do with my bride ain't your business, little brother. Not yet, anyway. Where's Caesar?"

"Over at Jake Johnson's. His little bitch is in heat, and he wanted to breed her with Caesar." Dan grinned. "Cows, dogs. Everything's gettin' some. Give you any ideas?"

"I'll take Wrangler with me, then." Walt faced his brother. "Keep your dick in your pants until and unless she indicates she wants it. We'll see where things are when I get back."

"Just watching out for your interests."

"Have I told you this morning to shut up?"

"Yup, just like you always do when I say something you don't wanna hear." Dan arranged the supplies in his arms. "Be careful out there. The communicators have been full of reports of versa attacks. Something seems to be setting them off."

Walt shut the truck door. "Engine, start." The truck gave off its low hum. "Maybe it's mating season for versas, too. Sex seems to bring out the worst in all things."

"I wouldn't say that," Dan said, backing toward the house. "And don't worry about Sabina. Maybe the other Sheridan brothers can persuade her to stay."

Chapter 6

Three days passed since her arrival at the Triple S. Three days since Walt's abrupt departure. At the last minute, he rushed back inside and dragged her into the bedroom they would eventually share to ask her one more time to confess what she hid from him.

She still couldn't bring herself to admit why her photo was splashed all over the Comm sets at the shuttle terminal. After only one night, she hadn't had time to make Walt want her, and now she had to capture his brothers' hearts, too. She couldn't tell him the extent of her crimes, not yet, not when his cool attitude proved how little it would mean to him for her to be sent back to Earth.

He'd studied her face, gave her a fast, hard kiss and strode out of the house without another word to anyone.

She'd learned in the last few days her saving grace took shape in the other Sheridans.

Sweetheart described Charlie, shy, but always anticipating her desires, always prepared to listen, talk or do whatever she wanted. He seemed to form a crush on her from the moment she arrived, and though she noticed a hard-on under his jeans from time to time, he made no move to do anything about it.

Not so, Dan. He openly flirted, never missed an opportunity to brush against her or touch her. The comfort she felt with him allowed her to do the same. She whispered a joke to him once, letting her lips skim his earlobe. He gave her a lazy, sexy smile like the one at the table that first morning but didn't act on it.

In different circumstances, she would have relished Dan's friendship. They liked the same jokes, shared the same philosophy of

life and passion for eighteenth-century poets. He might have a round, adorable face, but Sabina saw him working shirtless, and he kept his body buff and firm. Luscious, actually.

The problem of whether she could bring herself to have sex with more than one man plagued her.

Charlie was solicitous, Dan was stimulating, but neither Sheridan sparked her like Walt did. She really liked the younger Sheridans, but they didn't have their brother's fire or his tightly controlled passion simmering just below the surface. If only she could combine the three men into one.

She debated what to do that morning as Charlie showed her how to train pea vines over yards of wooden trellises. She stretched far overhead to tie a piece of netting to the top of the trellis and caught him ogling her breasts. Light as a butterfly, he touched her butt. If he had been Dan, he would have squared himself behind her and felt her up. If he'd been Walt, he would have had her naked and on the ground.

She shivered in delight at the mental image and knew what she had to do. Returning to Earth was not an option. Still, this meant a life change, a life's commitment. Sleeping with three men had never been one of her fantasies. She loved being with Walt. Would it be so bad making love with Charlie, too? If sleeping with one fantastic man was great, sleeping with two might be even better. Sabina put off the thought of having sex with Dan, the brother who seemed most like a comfortable friend.

One brother at a time.

"Are we ready to move on to something else?" she asked.

"Oh, uh, sure," Charlie stammered. His face turned as red as the beets they harvested that morning, a striking affect since she knew Charlie was a man, not a boy.

"I think so, too," she said in a low voice. To her dismay, a wave of lust flashed through her. She wanted him, sensing that he probably had never been with a woman before. Power rode the wave of desire.

She had every right to want Charlie. He might be Walt's brother but he was also her husband. She wanted to be his first, to share his excitement and newfound sexuality.

She wasn't much older than Charlie, but Kevin ensured she had a thorough sex education. "I won't marry a woman who doesn't know at least a dozen ways to get my rocks off," he said the first time he made her suck him. Soon after their first time together, Sabina realized she disliked sex, which was why her lust for the Sheridan men surprised her so. One's partner made all the difference, it seemed.

"And what would that next level be, Charlie? Do you know?"

"Not exactly," he mumbled. He shot a glance at the house, where Dan installed the floor in her new bathroom.

"Don't be nervous," she whispered. She cupped the erection straining against his blue jeans and stroked him through the rough material. He sucked in a breath. "Does that feel good?" He nodded. "Then," she said, "this will feel even better."

She dropped to her knees. Pulling down his jeans and briefs, she saw his cock for the first time.

"God, you're magnificent," she told him, and she meant it. Thick and highly veined, he had to be eight inches long or more.

"You're not disappointed?"

If she hadn't been afraid of hurting his feelings, she would have laughed. "Half the men on Earth would kill for what you have," she assured him.

She took an experimental lick and felt him tremble. He lifted the hem of his shirt. She looked up as she slid half of him into her mouth. He watched, his eyes glazed but blazing and his mouth slightly open. He breathed hard.

Yanking off her gloves, she longed to touch him. She stroked his hips, his round, firm butt cheeks, and his scrotum. He moaned, and she swirled her tongue across his head and delved into his slit. Then she sucked him again, a bit farther with each dip of her head.

The smell of the rich, dark earth they'd been working and the heat of two suns on her back drove her to take him harder and harder. He tasted as fresh as the garden, clean and young, and untouched. His shyness infused her with a kind of desire unknown before. He filled her mouth, but she wanted even more. What started as a means of staying on the planet spiraled into pure desire.

Charlie's eyes drifted closed, and he began to thrust forward, fucking her mouth as she sucked him. Good. She needed to know he wanted this as much as she wanted to do it for him.

Yes, oh, yes.

Finally, she deep-throated him. Kevin always wanted her to do this, not understanding it required a length of cock he didn't possess. Charlie had it, though. She held him there as long as she could, pumping her tongue against the underside of his shaft. He came in a rush, his cum rich and slightly salty, tasting as good as his skin felt under her fingers. Afterward, he staggered back slightly when she finally rose to her feet.

"That was...that was." He grinned. "I don't even have words."

"It will only get better," she promised. "I want us to be friends, Charlie."

"Anything you want, Sabina, anything. I'm here for you." His cheeks burst into color again. "Do you think we can do this again sometime?"

"I think we've only just begun, Charlie. We'll give each other a great deal of pleasure."

He heaved a sigh. "Good." Zipping his jeans he asked, "So, are you staying?"

"I'd like to."

Kevin will never find me here. Even if the girl at the shuttle terminal recognized me, no one knows where I've gone. He will never find the ranch, never come after me here. I'm safe.

Charlie tucked in his shirt and lowered his voice. "I have a favor to ask you. But not until Dan leaves to join Walt, okay?"

"Anything I can do for you, I will."

He only nodded, smiled at her, and led the way back to the house, leaving Sabina to gather up her work gloves and wonder what secrets the youngest Sheridan kept.

* * * *

The storage room held supplies of all sorts, neatly stacked and arranged. Dan had sent Charlie and Sabina to retrieve a pipe, some brackets, fittings, and joint compound.

"Can you reach that box, Sabina?" Charlie pointed to a metallic container on the second shelf Sabina knew he could have reached easily. Rising on her tiptoes and grasping the can arched her back and emphasized her breasts.

Charlie gave a soft, satisfied "*Hmmm.*" Close behind her, he grasped her ass, letting his hand slide across her cheek as she lowered to her feet. She leaned back and he slipped his hand beneath the waistband of her jeans. Since his blow job in the garden four days ago, Charlie became a sex maniac. And inventive. He searched and found numerous reasons for them to be alone.

Though he became more assertive, he always proved himself a gentle man, asking what pleased her, worrying whether he hurt her, and if he made her happy. To her great surprise, his easy touch made her *very* happy. So did his cock. He loved everything they did, giving her confidence to take the lead or follow as his technique improved.

"Put down the box," he said in a gruff voice. "I don't think Dan really needs these things right away."

"No?" She took his hand and led him out of the storage room and to a pile of hay near the stalls. "So you think we have a few minutes to rest?"

Grinning, Charlie sank onto the hay. "Maybe more than a few minutes." Reaching up, he unzipped her jeans and drew them and her

panties down to her ankles. She stepped out of them and dropped down to straddle him.

His erection grew long and hard in the vee between her legs. She flexed her hips, and her moisture streaked his jeans.

"So wet," he murmured, stripping off her blouse. He raised his hips to allow her to pull off his jeans.

She settled back down, her knees framing his hips, her sex tickled by the hair at the root of his shaft. A slight movement teased both her clit and the velvety steel rod of his erection. His shirt lay open, and she ran her hands up his torso through the soft mat of blond hair covering his chest. Desire rose like the thunder storms that used to erupt over Earth's plains, furious, wild, and uncontrollable.

"Sabina?" Charlie poised his cock at her pussy. His eyes were dark and heavy, his muscles taut. Still, he asked permission to enter her.

"Charlie, you know what I want," she said softly.

He thrust, filling her at once. She closed her eyes and cried out. His girth stretched her almost to the point of pain, but the root of his cock stroked her clit with every drive. Feeling the swirl of an orgasm begin, she sucked in her breath.

"Oh, so good," she murmured.

Charlie unsnapped her bra and tossed it aside. Arms surrounding her hips, he pressed her butt even farther onto his shaft and took her breast into his hot mouth. Sabina threw back her head. He tongued her nipple and she shattered, crying out in a tsunami of sensation. Charlie didn't relent, continuing his pounding rhythm.

Sabina opened her eyes and saw Dan standing at the end of the stall. Her breath came even faster. Charlie panted now and lay back on the hay, thumbing her clit. She fought for control, to take time to anticipate and enjoy what Charlie did to her body.

She cradled her breasts in her hands, then raised them and flicked her tongue across her nipples. Charlie watched intently. He licked his lips and thrust hard, looking as close to release as she felt.

Raising her head, she stared at Dan. He unzipped his jeans, freeing his penis. Watching her, he stroked himself, teasing her by pointing his shaft her way.

"Oh, God, oh, God." Another orgasm ripped through her. Charlie pulled her tight and gasped a breath. She felt his cock pulsing, shooting his cum deep inside. Through hooded eyes, she watched Dan come, his seed spurting out onto the hay. Then, casually, he tucked himself back into his jeans and left as quietly as he arrived.

Charlie slid her to his side and pulled her close. "Being with you has given new meaning to my life." He rubbed her arms. "I'll always be grateful to Walt for bringing you here. We need you, Walt needs you, and not just to help here at the house, either."

Walt? "I didn't think he needed anyone."

"Oh no, you're wrong." He stared at the roof of the barn. "Walt works too hard. He always has, but especially since we've been here on C8282. Walt's smart. He was accepted at the Global Institute of Technology. But then our mom died and there was nowhere for Dan and me to live. He walked in one day and said he wasn't going anywhere without the two of us. A couple weeks later, he found the ranch and moved us here. I can't imagine giving up the kind of opportunity he had, can you?"

Sabina couldn't. GIT accepted only the best and brightest. Anyone who *could* go did go.

"So you see? He gave up everything to give Dan and me a chance at a future. The Triple S is successful because of him, and he's pushing hard to build it into the biggest cattle producing ranch on the planet. Walt is strong and confident. But he holds in his emotions and needs. It's lonely for him."

She formed the same impression of Walt, strong, dependable, take charge. But lonely? And in his scruffy clothing she never figured him for someone who qualified for GIT. The man had more layers than a Grand Canyon north wall.

"Do you remember Earth?" she asked.

"Not much. But I'd love to see it again someday. Earth and everywhere else." He sat up and checked the barn. Sabina admired the way his muscles bunched and rippled, strength and vitality showing in every movement.

He turned on his side, braced on his hand. "When we looked through the agency's list of brides, I wanted you really bad."

"You did?" She felt herself blossom under the compliment. "Well, thank you, Charlie. I've enjoyed being with you." She stroked her index finger down the length of his penis.

"You taught school."

Oh. Sabina morphed from older seductress to schoolmarm in one instant. "I did, yes. Is that important?"

"Sabina, I want to get in to shuttle pilot school. But I was ten when we left Earth. The school in Harken City was too far away to go every day. Walt told me I had to do without schooling for a while. Not that he doesn't believe in education," Charlie added quickly. "He ordered some textbooks, but after a point they don't make a lot of sense to me. Walt and Dan already had too much to do on the ranch to take time to help me. Time ran away with me, too, with the farm and garden work. I can apply for training in another year but right now I wouldn't be able to pass the entrance test."

Sabina gave Charlie's predicament a moment's consideration. "So you want me to teach you? That's the secret favor you want?"

His cock grew hard. She fisted it and slid her hand down. The wiry curls at the base tickled her hand. Lazily twisting the root of his shaft, she took joy at his quick intake of breath. She rasped the edge of her thumbnail very lightly beside the veil running the length of the underside and then smeared the pre-cum glistening on the crown with her palm. Sweat beaded on his forehead with the effort of keeping himself in check.

"Would you? I've already sent for the application." He moaned and bit his bottom lip, pushing forward into her hand.

"I'll be happy to help, Charlie. I'm sure Walt and Dan will be proud when you get into the training program."

The smile that could have replaced C8282's two suns faded. He stopped everything, kisses, touching, fingering her clit. "I don't know. Walt has plans for the Triple S. The name is for Walt, Dan and me, the three Sheridans, you know. Walt wants the ranch to be like a dynasty, our heritage. He's never been very supportive when I've mentioned leaving before."

"He'll get used to the idea."

"I couldn't think of going before you arrived. After all Walt's done for Dan and me, I don't want to hurt him by turning my back on the ranch. I thought that with you to care for him, he wouldn't take my leaving so hard. I mean, he would still be upset, but he would have someone to help him get past it." He set his expression in a way that looked just like his eldest brother's. Stubbornness ran in the family, that was for sure.

"The textbooks I can handle. Your brother...I'm not sure what I can do with him."

"He doesn't show it, but he's got a tender heart. You'll see after you get to know him a little better."

At her nod, he looked past her with a wistful expression, as though seeing his future. And why not. At twenty-one, his whole life lay before him. Though only twenty-six, she suddenly felt old, her choices gone. She escaped Kevin just to find herself in another, nicer prison.

"Maybe in a few years Walt won't need me. I can apply for pilot school then." Shifting his gaze to her he said, "Thanks, Sabina. You'll like it here, I know. We'll take such good care of you, you won't be able to help yourself."

Ah, the naïve enthusiasm of youth.

"Even though I won't be around to be a true husband, can we still, uh...?" He gave a pointed stare at her breasts and his hand strayed back to caressing her lower curls.

"As often as you like."

With a groan, he parted her legs and settled between them. In little time, his rigid cock filled her. His quick, hard drives scraped her back against the hay. Tiny nipple bites sent splinters of pain mingled with shards of pleasure cutting through her body.

She ran her hands up his arms to his shoulders. Cords of muscle tightened and loosened beneath her fingertips. She furrowed her fingers through his hair. The contrast between its softness and the tension filling the rest of her body barely registered. Waves of orgasmic sensations slammed her to the shore, crashed over her, dragged her out, and smashed her again. She gave up her body to feeling alone.

Charlie collapsed, half on top of her. "You're so incredible."

She cuddled him, catching her breath. "Haven't you been with a woman before?"

"No. Walt and Dan always said I was too young." He grinned. "Guess I'm not now."

She liked Charlie so much. His sweetness shone through in everything he did. Even their down-and-dirty sex had a feeling of innocence about it due to his nature. She couldn't help comparing him to Kevin Groman's coarseness and cruelty. At first glance, one might think Kevin could crush Charlie. But Charlie's strength of character would put Kevin to shame, and expose him for the worm he was. How lucky for her to find the Sheridan brothers.

A shiver ran down her spine. If Kevin looked for her, she had staunch allies in her husband and his brothers. They would try to keep her safe. But what kind of allies might Kevin have?

Chapter 7

"Come in," she shouted over the sound of the shower. Until the brothers completed her bathroom, they all shared. Dan and Charlie respected her privacy, and there'd been no embarrassing moments in the few days she lived at the ranch.

"Sorry, Sabina, I have to wash up." Dan's voice drifted over the shower rod, washing over her like the water coming from the showerhead and making her just as warm. Aches from hours of work in the garden earlier that day melted away.

"It's not a problem," she said. "I'm in here, you're out there. You can't see anything, can you?" Closing her eyes, she envisioned his expression as he watched her ride his brother to completion. She squeezed the sponge over her breasts and let soap slip-slide over her nipples and down her abdomen.

"Actually, I can."

She whirled to see him peeking around the end of the shower curtain. Her foot slipped out from under her. Dan threw back the curtain and caught her under her arms. "Steady. I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's all right. Thanks." Sabina didn't try to push him away, and Dan's arms tightened.

She and Dan formed a bond of friendship she feared would change if sex came between them. But he really did have a luscious, full mouth. Sabina suddenly wondered how it would feel on hers.

"You're getting all wet," she said.

"I just finished spreading the grout over the tiles in your new bathroom, so *you're* getting all dirty," he replied, his voice suddenly lower. His gaze dropped to her lips and then to where her breasts crushed against his shirt. "I think I like you dirty."

So much for preparing to deal with Dan. "Really? Is there an award for being dirty?"

"I think so," he murmured before lowering his head to take her lips.

The kiss marked her like a hot iron, searing her mouth and heating its way through her body. She slipped her arms around his neck and opened to him. His tongue tangled with hers, twining and twisting, delving and seeking. Finally, on a panted breath, he ended, branding her the way she now knew all the Sheridan men could.

"Pretty soon you won't have to put up with our mess."

In fact, she liked their mess, their scents permeating the bath, the way they left the toothpaste cap off and how the mirror stayed fogged after they took a hot shower and shaved. Even towels and underwear left on the floor didn't bother her.

"I don't mind. I really insisted on my own bathroom because I was mad."

Dan chuckled. "Walt does have a way about him. I can't tell you how many times he's aggravated me to the point I considered jumping on a shuttle and leaving him to his precious ranch." He bent to nibble on her neck. Delicious thrills coursed straight to her pussy.

"I was mad at myself, really."

"Oh." He smiled warmly. "Well, I won't jump on a shuttle and leave you."

A now familiar tingling started low in her belly. The deal was all three brothers or nothing. The time had arrived.

"Maybe instead of soaking the floor, you should just climb in here with me. You wash my back and I'll wash yours."

"I thought you'd never ask." He toed off his boots, stripped, and left his clothes in a soggy pile.

By the time he pulled the curtain closed, his cock had risen to an impressive length. Not quite as long or thick as Charlie's, but Sabina believed a master could create beauty with any tool.

"What's this about washing backs?" His grin turned impish. He raised his hands to play with her nipples.

"Turn around and I'll show you."

His brows rose, and his smile became challenging before he turned and braced his hands on the back of the shower wall and his feet apart.

Sabina gave him an appraising examination. Now that she actually saw him, she realized the deceptiveness of his full face. His body was perfect with a flat stomach and rippling, corded muscles playing across his shoulders. His waist gave way to narrow hips and a small, round ass.

When she smoothed her hand over one cheek, he trembled. Under shaggy, golden brown hair, his neck tightened and his shoulders bunched with restraint. Restraint she meant for him to lose.

As she'd done to herself, she squeezed the soapy sponge over Dan's back. Rivulets of suds and water streamed over his ribs and between his buttocks. He sucked in a breath. Instead of using the sponge on him, she spread the soap with her hands, across his shoulder blades and down his sides, up his spine and out over his shoulders. He said nothing.

Then she pressed a soapy hand between his ass cheeks, teasing his hole before slipping between his legs to his scrotum. She lavished it with soap. Dan dropped his head and at last she heard his breathing turn labored.

"Should I wash you here?" She tugged gently on his scrotum. "Is this dirty, do you think?"

"Not as dirty as my imagination."

"You didn't need much imagination watching Charlie and me this morning."

Silence. Then he said, "You got off knowing I watched."

Her low chuckle surprised even her. "You're right. You made me hot."

"As hot as my brother's dick filling your pussy?"

She bit back a groan. Something wet trickled from her pussy, and it wasn't water. "The two of you are almost more than a woman can handle."

"Almost?" His tone held the same challenge she saw in his eyes before he gave her his back.

She bent far enough to lock his cock in a soapy grip. At the same time, she gave his ass an open-mouthed kiss, flicking his skin with her tongue.

"Christ almighty!" Dan spun around and caught Sabina to him. His mouth sought hers. His tongue pressed between her lips, catching her moan. Sabina spread her legs when Dan dropped his hand to her mound. He angled his head, covering her lips. Waiting no longer, he tickled her clit and then found her slick passage.

Two fingers explored her recesses while his thumb rubbed the aching nub at the top of her slit. Sabina burned, wanting to rub, wanting to stroke, wanting to be stroked.

Dan pulled back. He raised his fingers to his mouth and sucked them. "Sweet. When we get out of here, I want you to sit on my face so I can suck your juices."

No one ever suggested such a thing before. It sounded dark and nasty. Forbidden. She pictured herself straddling his head. He held her ass firmly, making sure she remained in position. His questing tongue delved the depths of her pussy and then flicked her clit.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her body jumped forward, nearing orgasm on imagination alone. Liquid dribbled down the inside of her thighs and she didn't think it was all water. The scent of her arousal mingled with that of soap. Her clit throbbed with need and she just knew if she could angle her body properly, the shower spray would send her the rest of the way over the edge.

His eyes softened. "No one's ever eaten you, have they?" She shook her head. "Then I'll be the first." Holding her so the shower poured water between their bodies, he said, "But there's something else I want right now."

To her surprise, Dan reached behind her and shut off the water. He helped her out of the tub. She stood dripping while he dug something out of the cabinet under the sink. When he bent her over the rim of the sink and slathered a cold, wet cream on her ass, she knew what lay ahead.

"I like using the back door," he explained, "but I won't if you don't want me to."

She never liked it when Kevin did it to her, but then, Kevin had never gotten her to the point of explosion before taking her from behind. Her pussy throbbed with need. Hesitating for only an instant, she pushed her hips back in invitation.

"That's my girl," Dan murmured.

He prepared her so well his entry produced only slight discomfort, stretching, not splitting her. He moved slowly, letting her adjust to the feel of him inside. Reaching around, he skimmed her clit.

"Oh, yeah." He slid his fingers through her moisture and gave relief where she needed it most.

Sabina rode Dan's hand, inadvertently increasing their pace. A tight coil of tension formed in her belly. Dan pumped her ass, sending thrills of pleasure through her. When he used his thumb to stroke her clit, she came with an amazing force.

"Dan? Sabina? You in here?" The door opened. "Oh. Gosh, I, uh, I heard a noise but I didn't know you were busy."

Sabina turned her head to see Charlie filling the doorway, his eyes big as saucers, his cheeks adopting a strawberry hue.

"Yeah!" Dan came. He pressed her clit hard, then dropped his head to her back, panting.

"Oh, God." Aftershocks rolled through her. She could barely speak. "Charlie."

He had to have known she would fuck Dan, but she hadn't wanted him to learn about it like this. Not gentle, sweet Charlie. He could be hurt, devastated about sharing her so soon after having his first taste of sex. At the least, jealousy would strike and cause problems. Would he ever forgive her?

"Sabina?"

Guilt competed with the pleasure still thrumming through her. "Yes, Charlie?" she asked, trying to be as gentle as possible.

"Do you think *I* could do that with you sometime?"

* * * *

So much for thinking she ruined Charlie's life.

Dan slipped out of her and she stood, facing their reflections in the mirror. He raised his brows, leaving the answer to Charlie's question squarely on her shoulders. His eyes showed no hint of possession or jealousy or how he felt about his brother bursting in on them. She never wanted to go up against Dan in a poker game.

"Well, Charlie," she started, "we're all adults. I don't see why we can't enjoy each other to the fullest."

"Great," he said enthusiastically. "I finished mucking out the stalls in the barn and I could sure use a shower. Wanna take one with me?"

"Um..."

Dan's amused expression relieved her. "Go use the hose on the side of the house, kid. Sabina has a shower to finish with me."

"Okay, Dan." Charlie ducked his head. "See you later, Sabina," he said shyly and closed the door. The clopping of his boots echoed down the hall. How had she missed his approach? Dan rubbed his hands across her ass and she knew how.

"If I spend much more time in the shower I'm going to wrinkle." She smiled at his reflection and he smiled back.

"I'll protect you."

Another Sheridan said that just a few days ago. She believed Walt then, and she believed Dan now.

She thought about Walt often and wondered where he was, what he found out on his vast expanse of land. Now she pictured him in a new light, sitting near a fire drinking coffee and wishing for something more to fill his life. Wanting someone to share life with. He made a poor bargain with her. With the law chasing her and the possibility of Kevin's lies threatening her very life, she didn't know what she could offer Walt.

Dan distracted her by cupping her breasts, lifting them, squeezing them together while watching in the mirror. He licked her neck and the sensual gesture drove her mindless. Cum trickled down her butt cheek. Dan rubbed it into her skin. His cock showed signs of life again, rising on the back of her thigh.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, nipping on her earlobe.

She smiled, leaning her head back on his shoulder. "I look like a drowned cat. My hair is soaking wet. I'm without makeup and I'm dripping all over."

"Hmm," he murmured. "I like the way you drip."

"I have a feeling you're the bad boy of the Sheridans," Sabina said. Reaching back, she stroked his hips, pulled him closer. Heat began to build. She imagined Dan could do wicked things to a woman. She wanted him to do them to her. Their gazes locked in the mirror.

"Nah. I'm the peacekeeper." He flexed his hips, and she sighed.

"You make sure Charlie's happy and Walt's happy so the two don't come to loggerheads?"

"That's about it." He nuzzled her hair.

"Always making sure others get what they want. What about what you want, Dan?" Pushing back, she felt his cock twitch and lengthen.

"It happens now and then," he said. The hooded look he gave her in the mirror made her shiver in anticipation of what he next planned for them. "This is a case in point."

Slowly, she raised one arm until she cradled his cheek. Turning her head, she kissed him. There was no hesitant, gentle brush of lips. This man liked fire-hot wantonness, and she aimed to give it to him.

His tongue dove past her lips and teeth. He braced her legs with his and pushed her into the sink with the force of his hips. His cock slid along the crease of her ass. Rolling her nipples between his fingers, he moved his lips over hers, devouring her mouth.

Her breath quickened. Having all of him pressing against all of her stoked the fire in her belly. She wanted him filling her pussy, driving into her with all the dark passion she knew he possessed. She wanted to feel the mattress give beneath her and to look down her body to see Dan's cock, wet with her juices, gliding in and out of her.

When he broke away to kiss her jaw, her neck, her shoulder, she could hardly think. "I think I know what you want," she managed to say.

"And what do you think?" He worked his way back up to her ear, and what he did with his lips to the rim of her lobe about drove her crazy.

What was the question? "A little fucking."

His chuckle rumbled into her ear and through her body. "A hell of a lot of fucking."

Oh, yes. She nodded, feeling like melting into him. "I think we can work that out."

He leaned back far enough to slip one hand from her breast to between her and the sink. With his thumb on her clit, he probed her pussy with his finger. Her hips jerked in response, and he settled her against him, perfectly aligning her body to take advantage of his cock and his finger. Sabina closed her eyes to enjoy the sensations flowing through her body.

"Thank God you came," Dan murmured.

"Hmm. Did you have any doubts about making me come?"

"Not like that," he said with a chuckle. "I meant thank God you came here."

"I'm glad, too."

He removed his hand and turned her to face him. She winced when he grabbed her around the waist.

"Sorry," Dan said, yanking his hands away. Then he looked at where he held her. "Why're you so sore? Did I hurt you? Did Charlie?"

"No. It happened on Earth."

Tenderly he felt her side, probing with gentle fingers. "You broke a couple of ribs. How?"

She sighed and looked away. "The man I—"

"A *man* did this?"

She bit her bottom lip. He crossed his arms, an angel of wrath standing before her. A naked angel who, seconds ago, had been ready and willing to fuck her. How had she lost control of the situation? "I was engaged to him."

"If you're still sore, he must have beaten you pretty bad."

"He did." She stared into his eyes. "It doesn't matter now. It happened only twice."

"Two too many times."

"I agree, and that's why I'm here." Even standing naked and looking like a drowned cat, she had some pride left. She held her head high and squared her shoulders. "The second time, a friend put me in touch with the mail-order bride people and hid me until I healed. When I saw Walt's profile and where he lived, I picked him. This is the farthest I could get from Earth and *him*. That's why I have to make this work, why I agreed to seal the contract so soon. Walt *can't* send me back, Dan." She hated the pleading she heard in her voice.

"Walt's one of the fairest men you'll ever meet, and he's good. You'll see." He stroked his chin, studying her. "That's why you made it with Charlie and me so fast?"

She nodded but put her hand on his chest when he frowned. "But I've enjoyed being with you. I really have. More than I'd ever have

imagined. The Sheridans are amazing men. Any woman would feel lucky to be in my shoes. *I'm* lucky."

His expression softened and then went blank. "Don't you think the guy will come after you? He asked you to marry him, though I can't believe any man who would beat a woman could possibly love her."

"I hope he won't think I'm worth coming after."

Dan snorted. "Walt would. Any of us would."

Tears stung the backs of her eyes. She tried to blink them away. She hated showing weakness, hated feeling it even more. "It's a possibility. Kevin hates to lose, and I didn't cover my tracks as well as I thought I had."

"He won't find you here," he said with confidence.

"He's rich with lots of power. If anyone can find me, Kevin Groman can."

Dan gaped. "Kevin *Groman*? You're the woman they've been talking about on the news reports?"

"I hoped you hadn't heard or wouldn't understand the seriousness. Walt didn't seem to know who it was in the Comm story." She nibbled her lip as dread filled her. "So, you know what happened?"

"If it doesn't concern cows or the ranch, Walt doesn't listen to anything." He whistled softly. "Wow, Kevin Groman's attempted killer is standing here with me, all naked and sexy. Did you do it?"

She started to shiver. Dan grabbed a nearby towel and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"I took a thousand Galactic dollars, money of *mine* he confiscated when we became engaged. When he found me packing, he was furious. He pulled a knife." She shrugged. "I pulled a gun. Winging him in the shoulder slowed him down enough for me to escape. I changed my hair color and name, and you know the rest."

"Did you love him?"

Humiliation rose like bile in her throat. "We met when he spoke at a teachers' conference. I was enticed by the excitement and attention and was too stupid to see the man and not the image."

"Don't beat yourself up. He's charismatic. I've listened to his speeches and he's very persuasive." Dan took her in his arms. "Well, as I said, he won't find you here."

"I hope not because he won't be happy just taking me back. He'll take out his humiliation on anyone who helped me." For the first time, Sabina began to realize the enormity of what her run might cost.

Chapter 8

Two days later, Dan called Sabina back to Walt's bedroom. He and Charlie stood in front of the door leading into the new bathroom, grinning. "Your bathroom's finished," Dan said.

She clapped her hands. "Wonderful! Thank you both so much."

Dan opened the door with a flourish, and she stepped in to see it for the first time.

"It's beautiful," she said running her hands over the stone vanity counter and eyeing the water-jet tub. "This is like a spa. I can't believe you had all of this just stored away in the barn."

"Some of it the previous owner left, some we've stored up for when we got around to making changes. Until you arrived, I wasn't sure we ever would make this place into a home." Dan's eyes held more meaning than she wanted to think about.

"We wanted to make it special, Sabina," Charlie said. He gestured toward a glass filled with flowers from his garden. "I picked those for you."

She cupped his cheek. "You are so sweet."

"And I thought of the celebration activity as *my* surprise for you." Dan's eyes glimmered the way they did when he wanted her.

She smiled. "I can only imagine."

"No, you can actually participate. If you're available now?"

"I think I've found I'm always available." What a slut she'd become, and how she enjoyed it.

The two men shared a very pleased look. "Join us in my room, then," Dan said. "Naked."

The past several days had been the best in Sabina's memory. It seemed she had an affinity for gardening and cooking. Housekeeping didn't bother her. She felt at peace except for worrying about Kevin.

Yesterday, Dan mentioned that the news reported a lead in the case. Could they mean her? If so, she had no doubt Kevin would bring his own kind of justice when he arrived. In the process, he would destroy anything or anyone in his way. Could she stand having Charlie or Dan hurt or killed? With the kind of power at Kevin's disposal, Walt wouldn't stand a chance defending her, assuming he'd even want to. When the dust settled, Walt would hate her for destroying his family, and *that* she didn't think she could take.

She wasn't sure when she stopped thinking solely of what Kevin would do to *her* and began worrying about what he would do to the Sheridans. She shouldn't stay. If a glimmer of hope existed that her absence might protect them, she should run away from the Triple S as fast as possible.

But surely she needn't leave immediately. Kevin couldn't arrive in less than two months. Until then she would drink her fill of Sheridan men and store the memories for when she was alone.

Quickly, she stripped and padded down the hall to Dan's room where they waited for her, also naked.

"Hold out your hands," Dan said. She did it, and he tied them with a strip of fabric. "Too tight?"

She wriggled her wrists, testing the knots. "No."

"Good. Now this." He used another fabric strip to blindfold her. "I've thought about this a dozen times since you arrived."

"Fold your arms over your head and turn yourself over to us," Charlie said.

Sabina started. "I've never been able to do that," she said. "Not with any man."

"With us you will," Dan whispered into her ear. He ran his tongue along the edge of her lobe, sending shivers down her spine. "In case you haven't noticed, we aren't just *any* men."

She smiled at that. "No, you're Sheridans." Someone huffed a laugh. Dan or Charlie? It didn't sound like either of them.

"Close your eyes, Sabina. We'll take care of you."

Sweet Charlie. If he said she was safe, she knew it to be true. When Dan promised her a sensual journey with maybe a step into the darker side of desire, he'd deliver. She willed herself to relax and enjoy the experience.

"You're beautiful, Sabina," Charlie murmured. "I'm so glad you came to be our wife."

Only a few days ago, she hadn't expected to be happy to be *their* wife. Now she couldn't imagine being anything else.

If only I knew how Walt would take my explanation of why I fled to C8282. Will he be as supportive as Dan, or will he notify the law and have me deported?

She should have told him everything when he first asked her and pled for his assistance in escaping Kevin instead of lying to him by omission. Back then she didn't know Walt, couldn't trust that he wouldn't turn right around and put her on the next shuttle back to Earth. After the last few days hearing about Walt's character, she knew he was an honorable man who could be counted on to do the right thing. He had already for his brothers. Still, the same man who might take pity on a woman in need of help might not forgive one who lied to him. And who, by doing so, put him and his family in danger.

If Kevin came after her, Walt, Charlie and Dan would be front and center of his wrath. Unless they chose to turn her over, the only action that might save them and the ranch.

I love them.

The certainty of her emotion nearly knocked her to her knees. Sabina closed her eyes on the mixture of joy and pain her admission cost her. To protect the men she loved, she would go to Hell itself. Returning to Earth with Kevin wouldn't be far off the mark, but she would do it if he agreed not to harm the Sheridans.

She pushed away intrusive images of Kevin and allowed herself the pleasure of Dan's and Charlie's attention. Even if Kevin tracked her to C8282 and managed to find the Triple S, he couldn't arrive for weeks. She wouldn't let him destroy what time she had with two thirds of her family, temporary though the time may be. She pushed all notions of Kevin to the back of her mind.

Then all thought escaped her. Someone parted her legs. Soft hair smoothed the inside of her thighs and lips nibbled the tender skin. A tongue coaxed her clit. Flames leapt to life in her core. Whoever knelt at her mound spread the lips of her sex and explored the area with his tongue. He jabbed into her passage, adding his moisture to hers.

"Oh, God help me."

From her left, the other brother suckled her breast, taking her nipple into his mouth and pulling hard. From her right, someone else did the same. Wandering hands kneaded her buttocks.

Wait! Three mouths consuming her, three sets of hands touching, caressing, holding. Three men driving her insane with passion.

Walt!

The tension coiling in her belly exploded and she came, shivering with the power of her climax. The world disappeared. White light shimmered behind her eyelids. The orgasm totally mastered her, and she submitted, gladly.

When the sensations subsided, her knees gave out. Six strong arms captured her. One of the brothers separated her butt cheeks with his thumbs to provide space for his tongue to make a long, slow pass along the crease. A brother in front slid his hand down her torso until he reached her mound.

She shifted to lean her head on the shoulder of the third brother. Front Man teased her clit with his finger and then slip-slided two fingers into her passage, drenched with the juices from her orgasm. He plunged his fingers in and then withdrew, surged forward and then retreated, causing a moist smack that sounded like cannon shot in her sightless world.

Back Man swirled his tongue around her rosebud while squeezing her butt cheeks. She flexed her hips, riding one brother's fingers and inviting the other to delve into her darker passions.

The brother in front withdrew from her pussy and painted her lips with her cream. Her scent filled her nostrils. She opened her mouth and he gave her his fingers. Sucking her essence, smelling herself, tasting herself, overwhelmed her senses. Sabina couldn't help it. She came in another crashing orgasm.

Leaving the man at her side to support her, the other two changed places. Then hands roamed without restraint, stroking her back, caressing her tender breasts, rubbing her legs, stomach, thighs. One nipped her neck while another licked her earlobe as though she was a tasty treat invented for their delight. A soft moan tore from her throat. She grasped her head lest she drop her hands and interrupt the spell woven around her in any way.

Back Man massaged her puckered opening with a thick, creamy substance. He slid in one finger, stretching and smoothing from the inside. Then two fingers pulled her open, probing deeper, pressing harder.

The brother beside her wrapped his hand around her neck, tilting back her chin, forcing her head to his shoulder. Front Man took one nipple between his teeth and flicked it with his tongue. Shards of pain mixed with pleasure. She sucked in a breath and held it.

"What do you want, Sabina?" Charlie whispered the words. So he stood beside her, stroking her throat, her cheeks, her lips. "Tell us what you want."

She couldn't speak while desire thundered through her veins and fiery passion threatened to erupt, overwhelming her senses.

"Tell us." Walt said from his position at her back. He gently pressed another finger to her tight opening and licked her nape.

"We'll do anything for our bride," Dan added in a hoarse voice, releasing her nipple. She couldn't stand another minute of this exquisite torture.

"All of you." She barely got out the words.

Dan lifted one of her knees over his hip and then the other. His sex fit neatly against hers and slid in as though made for her. Walt eased his cock into her butt hole, taking his time at first but being hurried along with every rock of Dan's hips. When the two men began a steady, pounding rhythm, Charlie grasped her chin and turned her head. He kissed her long and deep, thrusting his tongue in and out.

Her third release slammed into her. Sabina would have screamed if Charlie hadn't maintained control of her mouth. She couldn't catch her breath, couldn't think, couldn't process anything other than sensation.

Her nipples scraped through Dan's chest hair. Walt kept a tight, supporting grip on her thighs. Their sweat-covered bodies crashed together, blending into one body—hers—and then separated, creating another kind of friction, a slight reprieve before the splendid merger once more.

Charlie coaxed her tongue into his mouth and sucked it hard before pressing his tongue back into her with uncontrolled desire. The smell of sex permeated the room until the simple act of breathing launched her body into a spiraling, erotic orbit.

Her orgasm didn't end. One wave crested, smashed to the shore to make room for the next peak and crash. Her arms dropped, boneless, around Dan's shoulders.

Charlie surrendered her mouth and her head lolled back onto Walt's collarbone. Dan conquered her lips, kissing her with an air of madness and unbridled lust.

She didn't know who was who, where one body began and another ended. She didn't care. Every point of contact brought a new sensation, every thrust a fresh awareness. Her men used her body and she loved it. She loved *them*.

As if by signal, they pushed into her, rigidly holding tight. Two cocks pulsed strongly, seemingly at the same point deep inside. Her muscles clenched, gripping one then the other.

Dan released her lips to take gasping mouthfuls of air. Walt panted hot breaths on her neck. Sabina had given up trying to breathe, trusting her body to do what it needed to keep her alive. If it didn't, well, she'd die happy.

"Sabina," Walt ground out, "we take you for our wife."

Through her orgasmic fog, Sabina answered. "I take you for my husbands."

* * * *

Walt sat at the table with a half-drunk cup of coffee. Dan sat to his right with a full cup he hadn't touched, and Charlie sat to his left, hands folded neatly in front of him. Sabina fell asleep immediately after they laid her on the bed, so the men showered, dressed and retired to the kitchen, their place for family discussions and hashing out problems.

He stared at Dan, whose open shirt and heavy-lidded look hinted at what he'd just been doing. He not only appeared to have been dragged from a good fucking, he looked ready to get back to it as soon as business in the kitchen concluded.

Walt gripped his cup. He not only wished there was time for Dan to get back to business, he wished there was time for him, too. "So, she accepted a blindfold and being tied up. I'm glad I arrived home in time for the party. Seems like you two broke her in real good, huh?"

Charlie puffed out his chest like their old rooster in a pen of hens. "Don't talk about her like she's one of your horses. She's our wife."

Walt frowned. "I know. Sorry." He envisioned the expression on his youngest brother's face locked in passion while lapping Sabina's juices. His little brother had truly become a man.

"She's-she's... great, Walt," Charlie sputtered, blushing.

"Better than great," Dan added. "The woman is true to her word in every sense. She's been with Charlie every day out in the garden, she's helped in the barn, and taken over the kitchen. She's been tired

at night and sore from all the work, but no matter what goes on, she's up early and in here each morning making breakfast for us."

Walt's cock stirred at the "no matter what" Dan might mean. Had they been together every night? He looked forward to his own nights at home. "Has she said anything of her plans?"

"She hasn't committed one way or the other." Dan lowered his voice. "But I know one thing. We need her, and she needs us."

Walt nodded at the same time Charlie asked, "Is she in trouble?"

"Has she told you what the problem is?" Walt asked Dan. "I had a call from the sheriff while I was out in the north quadrant. Said some guy named Groman is on his way out here."

Dan leaned forward. "How did the bastard find her?"

"Sheriff said a girl at the shuttle terminal alerted security and they got a couple numbers from the truck plates as I pulled off. When they tracked it to the Triple S, he said he remembered we had a bride comin' in. Groman's been in constant touch, he said."

"Who's Groman?" Charlie asked, his brow scrunched.

"We can't let him get to Sabina," Dan replied. "What she did she had good reason to."

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?" Charlie's exasperation sent his voice up an octave, and Walt had to dig his nails into his palm to keep from smiling. At twenty-one, Charlie had reached manhood, but he was still young.

"I *thought* she'd talk to you," he admitted to Dan. Still, he wished Sabina trusted him enough to share her confidence.

"What are we going to do?" Charlie asked, evidently giving up trying to discover all of the whys and wherefores of the discussion and instead cutting to the salient point.

"Nothin' to do. I told the sheriff that I'll be happy to help Mr. Groman out by tellin' him all I know about our new bride."

"What?" Dan's chair crashed to the floor when he jumped to his feet. "See here, big brother, if you think you're going to turn Sabina over to that prick, you're sadly—"

"Walt has every right to do just that," Sabina said from the doorway. She twisted her hands but looked him square in the eyes.

"Walt," Charlie said quietly, "how can you even think of hurting her after what we just pledged?"

Walt ignored both Charlie and Dan, concentrating only on Sabina. A pretty blush tinged her cheeks, serving to make her look fragile. He long ago decided she was no murderer, attempted or not, and he had no intention of turning her over to anyone, the sheriff included, if it came to that.

Dan rushed to stand behind Sabina, hands protectively on her shoulders. Charlie stood, shifting stares from Walt to Sabina.

Walt came to his feet more slowly. Nodding to her he said, "Sabina."

"I didn't say it before, but welcome back."

He smiled. "Well, we were all a little preoccupied."

"I'm glad you're here. I want to talk to you."

"I'd welcome that." He stared into her eyes, looking for evidence she would finally tell him the truth. Moving forward, he took her delicate hand. Only a short time ago, her skin had been smooth and soft. Now her palm and fingers bore calluses. Still, in his big hand, hers felt small and in need of protection. He edged past Dan and led her into their room.

He shut the door in the faces of his brothers who both looked ready to beat him to a bloody pulp if he so much as raised his voice to Sabina. After what they just experienced, he didn't blame them. But he was still head of the family and Sabina's husband, no matter how inconsequential that fact might seem to Dan and Charlie. What he needed to know now was whether his position mattered to Sabina. If she didn't tell him what he wanted to know this time, he'd be forced to ask Dan to explain the circumstances of her arrival on C8282, and her lack of trust in him would be between them forever.

"Well?" He walked across the room so he didn't have to look her in the eye if she lied again. When she hesitated, he ran his hand

through his hair. Tension stiffened his shoulders the longer the silence continued.

"Walt, I want to apologize to you. I came here under false pretenses."

"You mean you didn't come here to marry me?"

"No. I mean, yes."

He checked out her reflection in the dresser mirror. She closed her eyes and now covered her face with her hands. He let out a breath and forced himself to relax. This was her story. He'd hear it all and help however he could. That was his way.

"It's okay, Sabina. Start from the beginning."

She sat on the bed, facing away from him, and the whole tale spilled out—her seduction by Kevin Groman's power and attention, how she moved in with him and agreed to marriage, his consequent abuse, her desperate escape.

"I thought changing my appearance and name would fool everyone, and it did. Until my picture was splashed all over the universe, anyway. Guess I don't really look that different."

"No, you don't. The sheriff explained who this man is. Did you honestly think you'd get away from someone as rich and connected as Groman?"

She gave a short laugh. "I hoped if I ran far enough, he'd think I was too much trouble to chase. C8282 is the farthest I could go."

"It's on the edge of nowhere, that's for sure," Walt agreed. "I'd guess he might have forgiven the murder attempt, but not the theft."

"It was *my* money."

"When you're involved with a man like him, nothing is ever yours. It's all his." Walt sat beside her and took her hand in his again. Turning it over, he examined her roughened palm and then her face, which had browned slightly and glowed with good health. These signs of her new life only made her more precious.

He thought of nothing but her since leaving the house, hoping she was becoming accustomed to the idea of being with him and Charlie

and Dan, practically counting the minutes before he could return to evaluate his household. When the call came from the sheriff, he dropped everything and hurried back so he and the boys could decide what to do.

"Well, now it's all a moot point. He's found me and he has the law on his side. No one will ever believe me over him."

"I do. Dan and Charlie do."

Her quick smile warmed his heart, though her eyes showed sadness. "I appreciate that more than you know." She glanced down at her hand in his and then back up. "I hate to ask anything more of you, but I have to."

Walt curled his fingers over hers and nodded.

"Hand me over to the sheriff, not Kevin. And then disavow any knowledge of who I am or what I've done. Tell them I lied to you about everything, that once the sheriff called you came back to see if I was stealing from you, too. Tell them anything to prove you knew nothing at all about me until today. Will you promise to do that?"

His heart squeezed. Sabina thought to protect them. "You know I won't, but why would you want me to?"

"I've spent months worried about what would happen to *me* if Kevin found me. These past days of being with the Sheridan men have changed that. The three of you have made me feel safe." She shook her head. "No, more than that. Cherished, loved." A shy smile lit her face. "Desired. I never knew being with a man could light such a fire, could kindle such need."

Walt warmed at her words. She loved him, all of them. Contract be damned, she was a Sheridan beyond what any paper stipulated.

"Kevin will be furious if he thinks you helped me in any way. He'll find ways to hurt Dan or Charlie, to destroy the ranch, to damage your reputation and ability to do business. You don't know how much influence he wields."

Walt smiled. "I have some power, too, you know. And a few ideas of how to deal with Groman."

"I'd die if something happened to any of you because of me."

"Remember the night in the truck?"

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth and nodded.

"I kept you safe, didn't I?" It ripped at his guts to see her eyes glisten with tears. He'd kill asshole Kevin Groman with his bare hands if he dared try to take Sabina. "Well, I'll keep you safe now. All of us will. That is, if you want to stay. I won't hold you to your contract if you choose to go somewhere else. We'll find a place where you can hide in safety."

The tears spilled onto her cheeks. He used his thumb to wipe them away.

"I love Dan and Charlie. And I've heard all about you, your courage in building a new life here for your brothers, your devotion to them. You're a good man, Walt Sheridan. I had a feeling about it when you rescued me in the shuttle terminal. That feeling developed into a conviction after listening to those who know you best. I would be honored to stay and be your wife, if there was any way."

"There's always a way, Sabina. And we'll find it because we love you, too."

"Oh." She smiled brilliantly and leaned into his embrace.

"What should we call you, Sabina or Carolyn?"

"Carolyn is gone. I kind of like the woman named Sabina."

"Sabina suits us just fine. Perfectly fine."

Chapter 9

Sabina couldn't stop the tears from flowing. Walt loved her. So did Dan and Charlie. The Sheridan men wanted her, and heaven knew she wanted them. Life on Earth faded in her mind. A future with three hardy men full of lust and life stretched before her.

Walt kissed the top of her head and they sat quietly. Eventually he rose, taking her with him to the window.

Sweeping plains lay as far as she could see. Large patches of tall grasses fanned by the wind covered sections of land dotted with windmills. Oases of trees rose skyward near the towers. Cattle strolled amidst it all, long tails swatting away unseen insects.

Walt stood behind her, his strong arms wrapped around her waist. She let herself enjoy being enveloped in his warmth. All worry fled, its place filled with a sense of comfort, belonging.

"Is all this your land?"

"As far as you can see and farther."

She heard the pride in his voice. And no wonder. From what Dan and Charlie told her, Walt sweated blood to make the ranch a success.

"How do you manage it all with only you and Dan?"

"It's not really just the two of us. We have three camps scattered across the property with five to ten ranch hands each. But we're the key. It's our legacy."

"I can see why you're passionate. It must have taken years to establish."

"I was lucky there. I bought it from a man who came here to ranch and hated it. He fenced the original parcel of land and built the house."

She smiled. "Ah, the house. It's easy to see bachelors live here."

Walt turned her in his arms and stared into her eyes. "The house is serviceable. That's all it's ever needed to be." Before she could open her mouth to explain the difference between a house and a home, he spoke again, one brow raised. "But I assume from your comment that you have changes in mind?"

"Nothing too much." She smoothed her hand down his cheek. "The Sheridan men aren't small. I'd like a bigger living room. Even when there are only three of us, we could use more space."

"Three of us? What does that mean?"

"Charlie, Walt. Don't you know he wants to move on, have a different life? He'll soon be off to start his own adventures."

"That damn boy doesn't know what li—"

She shushed him with her finger over his lips. "He's not a boy any longer, love, and he has dreams."

His expression softened then. "We'll discuss this further, woman."

"Yes, love."

He smiled at that.

Sabina moved out of his arms and stood beside him. She gestured at the vista outside the window. "We need a huge picture window overlooking the plains, don't you think? And a hydrogen stove and oven in the kitchen." She raised her own brows. "It takes a lot of effort to cook for hungry men, you know. I'd like a dining room where my family can gather for holidays, and a sitting area here in the bedroom where I can curl up and read."

"All that?" Amusement laced his words.

"Maybe more. I'll think about it."

Walt's laughter filled the room. "You do that. The boys and I will get with you after dinner one night and see what we can do."

Genuine joy filled her. "I'll do my best to make you and Dan and Charlie a good wife, Walt."

He took her in his arms again. His eyes smoldered. He traced her lower lip with his finger. "I knew from the moment I saw you that you were special, that you were the one for me, for us. We need you, Sabina. We want you to stay."

Then his lips met hers and everything else disappeared. Fear fell away, doubt dissolved. There was only Walt holding her, their bodies molding to each other, his tongue in her mouth. His hard shaft pressed into her belly, but not in the way she wanted. Her breasts ached to be touched, to be suckled, to be stroked and caressed. Moisture flooded her panties. Her scent permeated the air.

He lifted her onto the edge of the dresser, parting her legs and moving between them. Dragging his mouth away, he trailed open-mouthed kisses along her jaw. "I couldn't stop thinking about you," he whispered. "Every time I closed my eyes I saw your pretty face, heard your laugh, felt your hands on me. All I could think of was sinking my dick in your hot, tight cunt and making you mine over and over again."

She moaned and leaned her head back, giving him access to her neck. Her hands roamed his shoulders, his neck, through his hair.

"I wanted your lips on mine, your hands on me. I needed you so much I thought I'd die if I couldn't get home soon. The sheriff's call provided the reason, but for my own sanity I would have had to return very soon."

"I'm so glad you're here." She reached between them and unzipped his jeans, slipping her hand under the waistband of his briefs. Her hand latched on to his shaft with a firm grip, palming the head and then sliding down his length. His heat melded with her own through their clothing. Her nipples poked the thin material of her blouse, her breathing as labored as his.

"I want you right now," he mumbled, palming her breast at last.

"Dan and Charlie will hear us."

He chuckled. "Hell, I don't care. We can invite them in to watch, but I have to have you now."

The image of Dan stroking himself to completion while she rode Charlie in the barn raced through her mind. Would they watch her and Walt or join in? She groaned with need for this man, for all her men.

A month ago, after Kevin's treatment and the idea of becoming a stranger's bride, she shuddered at the thought of sex with any man. Now she relished the knowledge she could have any of these three different, wonderful men whenever she wanted. Desire surged through her.

"Now, Walt, here in our room."

"Nothing would make me happier."

He no sooner reached between them to rub his thumb across her clit, sending electricity leaping from one nerve ending to the next, than Dan called, "Walt! The sheriff's on the Comm. He says to tell you to stop whatever you're doing and get your ass to the phone. It's important." His chuckle came through the door. "Come on out, big brother. I can finish up in there for you."

"Shit." Walt rested his forehead against hers. "I can do quick, honey."

"No. I want you to take a good long time, loving me, Walt Sheridan. Go on. We'll have time for each other later."

He raised his head and winked. "Count on it." Seconds later, looking flushed but put together, she walked into the kitchen. Walt detoured to the cubbyhole he used for an office to take the Comm call.

"Want some coffee, Sabina?" As always, Charlie quickly looked for whatever he thought might please her.

"I'd love a cup, thanks."

"Sheriff sounded pretty worked up," Charlie said. "Wonder what's going on."

"I guess we'll know soon enough." That evil made its way to C8282 even as they sat calmly sipping coffee made her heart stutter.

Walt seemed confident the Sheridans could beat Kevin. She had faith in his courage and ability, but she knew for herself Kevin's ruthless cruelty too well to be certain of the outcome. Positive that as long as she remained at the Triple S the clash was inevitable, she still prayed their confrontation would never happen. Walt and his brothers protected what was theirs in the same way Kevin imprisoned what was his.

If only something would happen to him before he got here.

"Oh, that's a bad wish," she murmured.

"What's a bad wish?" Charlie asked, his gaze sweet as he examined her face.

Dan looked at her with a knowing expression. "You don't have to hope the asshole dies before we meet up him, Sabina. He'll be dead soon after if he tries to force you to go with him."

Dan knew her too well.

"Groman's on planet and about to head out here," Walt announced. He strolled into the kitchen as though one of C8282's two suns hadn't just fallen from the sky and torched her world.

"How?" she managed to ask.

He dumped the cold coffee in his cup into the sink and poured a fresh cup before taking his place at the head of the table. "You're right about his power and influence. He caught space on a military shuttle as soon as he tracked you to Intergalactic Brides. He probably left shortly after you did."

"Then why all the photos on the Comms if he knew where I was?"

Walt shrugged. "Maybe he thought you'd jump ship before reaching here. I don't know. Anyway, the sheriff says Groman insists on coming out here. He was out renting a hover-car while we were talkin'."

"Oh, my God." Sabina twisted her hands. "Walt, remember my request. Please don't do anything that will incite him. He's a dangerous man."

"We can protect you, Sabina," Charlie said.

Dan squeezed her hands. "A dozen Kevin Gromans can't beat three Sheridans."

"Besides," Walt added, "he's not coming here. We got trouble out in sector forty-five. I told the sheriff to direct him and his hoods out there."

"He's brought some of his men?" Sabina's stomach fell. Her mouth dried up. She knew when facing a tight spot the three men Kevin would choose to bring. Involuntarily, she shuddered.

Ignoring Sabina's question, Walt continued, "The sheriff isn't comin' with them. Seems they don't think an off-Earth sheriff deserves any respect, so he's washed his hands of them. He says if they're so damn smart, they can fend for themselves."

"Wow," Dan said.

"Yeah." Walt sent Dan a cold smile. "He said he reckons we can take care of ourselves without his help."

Dan snorted. "Right nice of him." Then he smiled, looking as though he enjoyed the idea of a fight. "So, it'll be a shootout in sector forty-five?"

"Let's hope it's no worse than that."

Charlie spoke up. "What do you mean? Is there something else going on?"

Sabina hoped she alone noticed the apprehension in Charlie's question. He would be embarrassed to have his brothers think he might be afraid. She clutched her hands on the table, having no such reservation. She was scared as hell for her men and didn't care who knew it.

"That's the whole reason I came back when I did." His warm glance her way reminded Sabina of his other purpose in racing home. "There must be a hole in the fence. I saw the remains of three cows and signs of grenett."

Dan looked grim. "If there are grenett, versa aren't far off."

Sabina started. "Versa?" Her terror in the truck hearing the creature's shriek still haunted her.

The men ignored her. Even Charlie seemed to forget she sat with them.

"With Groman hightailin' it out there, we'll deal with all the vermin at one time." Walt's face took on grim determination.

"I'm going with you," Charlie announced.

Walt shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

"I can help."

"Let him come," Dan said.

"What about Sabina? We can't leave her by herself," Walt said.

"Leave me a gun."

"A gun." Walt gazed at her questioningly. "Can you shoot?"

Dan smirked. "Well enough to hit someone's shoulder. That's pretty damn good in my book."

She smiled. "I'm not a perfect shot, but I *can* hit something if I need to. I'll be safe enough."

She saw a flash of fear in Walt's eyes, his worry showing plainly. "I don't know. What if Groman comes here instead of where he's told?"

"I'll be careful." She gave each of them what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "And I promise. I will aim and shoot at anything that looks threatening."

"Sector forty-five is a long way out. The chance of anything coming this close to the ranch is small," Dan added.

"Only if you agree to stay inside the house the whole time we're gone." Walt stared at her.

"I will, promise. I just want the three of you to be careful."

Walt pursed his lips. "I don't know. I don't like takin' chances. But I guess you'll be okay with a gun or two. The horse I'm leavin' here will be on auto-feed. You can go into the garden if you stay aware of your surroundings, but nowhere else. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Let's get out there and take care of things, then," Dan stood.

"Wait a minute," Sabina said. "I just want all of you to know that I love you. Be sure to come home to me safe and sound."

The three grins she received in return warmed her heart.

* * * *

Walt tugged his Stetson lower on his head to shield his eyes from the glare of the suns. For almost five days he tracked a rogue versa and still the bastard escaped him.

More than the versa, Walt searched for a man alone on the plains. An abandoned hover-car sat near the location Walt specified the sheriff to program Kevin Groman's mapping system, but no one remained in it. Dan and Charlie reported finding human carcasses half a mile away from the craft, in the opposite direction Walt rode. They couldn't tell how many people died, but Dan estimated at least two.

Groman or his back-up? They probably exited the car in order to find good positions from which to fire on the Sheridans. Too bad for them a versa found its way through the ranch's defenses. The only lucky prick was whichever member of the Groman party Walt now tracked. He had to be behind the versa, or Walt would have found his remains, too.

The man's luck wouldn't last long, though. Versa had excellent scent detection and enough cunning to toy with its prey before moving in for the kill. No matter how much of a prick Groman was, death by versa would be horrible. How ironic that the one man in the universe Walt wanted to kill he now had to try to save.

He kicked his horse into motion. What bothered him more than anything else was that this versa moved during daylight hours. With no hair or fur, the predators usually shunned the heat of the suns. That this one didn't, made it unpredictable and therefore seriously dangerous.

Walt also worried because he feared the rogue headed toward the ranch. The creature didn't make straight for the Triple S, but each time

Walt checked his position, he was closer to home. The place where Sabina should have felt some modicum of safety quickly would become a killing ground if the versa reached the ranch.

"No! No, no, no! Ahhh!"

The screams came from off to his right. Walt pulled out his Taysaure and pulled on the reins for a quick turn. He raced toward the sound, keeping up a punishing pace even as he imagined his help would come too late.

As suddenly as it started, the cries ended. Hair stood up on his arms with the silence. He slowed his horse, no longer sure which way to go without the shrieking to guide him.

Smearred blood on stalks of grass gave him the first indication he neared a slaughter site. A few feet farther the smell gagged him. His horse broke through the last of the grassy barrier and he saw the body. Two grenett, small, black, furry animals that followed versa and fed off whatever they left behind, feasted on the man's entrails. They looked up in time to see their own demise as Walt let loose with the Taysaure.

He swung down and approached the carcass. The top half of the body was ripped away. Body parts stretched a couple of yards from where it lay. Blood soaked clothing, boots and the ground. No identification distinguished the bottom half, and it would be anyone's guess who the poor devil was. By all rights, Walt should bury him, but he didn't want to take the time or spend so much time out in the open with the rogue versa loose in the area.

Turning away, he mounted his horse again and gathered the reins in his hand. As he prodded the horse to leave, a glint of sunlight off something shiny caught the corner of his eye. He walked to the body again and saw what he missed in the first examination. A piece of metal stuck out of the front pocket.

Using two fingers, Walt removed a battered, thin strip of metal curved back on itself.

"A money clip." Tooth marks and blood made the wad of bills stuck firmly in the clip useless, even if he had an urge to steal the dead man's money. Walt used a stick to push it out of the clip.

The metal itself was ragged with teeth marks, but the design remained intact enough to make out. Three initials, KHG. It seemed now Sabina was safe from Kevin Groman.

But was she safe from the versa? Walt wrapped the buckle in a handkerchief and stuffed it in his back pocket. He spotted another streak of blood leading away from the kill. Away from the kill, but straight toward the ranch.

Walt had to find a way to cut the creature. The blood trail led straight ahead. Coming upon a versa while it fed was stupid. Walt cut to the left and a shortcut to home. He would keep Sabina safe or die trying.

Chapter 10

For five days, Sabina dutifully wandered between the garden, three bedrooms, the small living room and kitchen. Cabin fever struck with a vengeance. She thought longingly of the horse in the barn. How could a short ride hurt if she stayed on Walt's property and close to the house? She missed the outdoors, sunshine, exercise.

Ah, hell. She missed her men.

Restless, she stared out the kitchen window at the barn, devoid of color like the house. She added to her renovation list the idea of taking out the wall beside the sink and putting in big French doors that opened onto a larger porch where they could eat and sit and have a drink in the dwindling light of the setting suns. In the living room she envisioned rustic, masculine colors, with big chairs to accommodate the size of the Sheridan clan. She pictured plush fabrics and softened corners, combining her personality with the men's.

No matter what happened with the house revisions, the one thing Sabina knew beyond doubt. She couldn't picture herself anywhere but on the Triple S.

She sighed and faced the window again. Movement at the side of the barn caught her eye. A black ball of fur jumped from the shadow of the barn and landed on what looked like a rock. The "rock" scooted across the yard, and the furry, kitten-like thing followed, swatting and hop scotching its way closer to the house.

"How adorable!" Sabina opened the back door and moved out onto the porch to get a better look. A closer perspective showed the animal wasn't a kitten. The fur looked the same, and its movements

reminded her of a cat she had as a child. But the creature's face was more pointed and whiskerless.

She stepped off the porch and squatted.

"Come on, sweet thing," she said, holding out her hand.

The furry animal stopped chasing the ground-hugging, shell-covered thing, which skimmed quickly through the holes in the garden fence and out of reach. The fur ball stared at her, blinking once before turning and prancing a few steps back toward the barn. It stopped and glanced over its shoulder at Sabina.

"So you want to play? I'm game." She took a few steps and giggled when the little creature shot into the air, rolled over, and swung its little paws at her playfully. It sprinted toward the barn, checking Sabina's progress once before heading into the darkness.

"I'm coming, you little cutie," Sabina called.

Walking into the barn from the bright sunlight blinded her temporarily.

Then movement in one of the stalls caught her eye. She felt her way, letting her eyes adjust to the change in light. At that moment, she realized an inconsistency. The horse didn't neigh or snort. Silence hung over the barn like a pall. A strange scent stung her nostrils.

She inched forward, trying to find the black ball of fur in the darkness of the barn. The smell worsened, gagging her with its thick, coppery essence. She rounded the corner of the stall and froze.

A hairless creature about four feet high turned on its hind feet to give her a soulless look. A string of bloody meat hung from its mouth, and the two inch claws on its front feet dripped blood. Sabina glanced at the floor of the stall where half a horse lay. The black "kitten" jumped onto the haunch and proceeded to rip and tear at the horseflesh with pointed teeth.

The larger animal growled low in its throat. Using its front claws to push the hanging meat into its mouth, it took a tentative step toward her.

Sabina backed up. A pitchfork leaned against the stall slats. She grabbed it and held it up, prongs out. The animal shifted its gaze to the pitchfork and then back to her. Narrowing its eyes, its previously impassioned stare now appeared calculating. As if its rippling muscles and fearless manner didn't scare her half to death, the damned thing showed intelligence, too. She might as well be facing off against a company of Prang3 battle warriors using nothing but a carving laser, but she refused to die without defending herself in some way—even a ridiculous way.

"Oh, God," Sabina whispered, stepping backward again. Then she thought she might as well say her final words out loud. She was done for either way. "Why the hell didn't I listen to Walt and stay inside?"

"Exactly what I was thinkin'," Walt said in a low voice from behind her. "But listen good now. When I say to drop, *do* it, without hesitation."

The animal took two quick steps and lunged.

"Drop!"

Sabina fell to the floor, covering her head with her arms and expecting at any second to feel her flesh ripped apart by sharp claws and teeth.

A laser blast shattered the day, topped by a high-pitched wail. A second blast rolled over Sabina like thunder in an Earth storm. Then...nothing.

Sabina trembled, too frightened to lift her head and see what happened. Was the thing dead, or did it wait for her to look up and meet its steely gaze before it shredded her skin with its teeth and claws? She felt a light touch on her shoulder and screamed.

"Shh, shh, it's okay. Come on, let's get out of here." Walt tugged on her arm.

Sabina pushed to her knees. The animal lay not two feet from her. Her breath came in short gasps. With some small sense of satisfaction, Sabina saw the pitchfork pierced the creature through the leg.

Take that!

The adorable, black ball of fur that lured her out to the barn leapt onto the larger animal and began feeding, watching her the whole time. Logically, she knew animals didn't have the same feelings as people, but she almost could feel its indifference to who or what it killed and ate. Sabina shivered as she started to fathom how close to death she'd come.

"I'm sorry," she said to Walt. "You had to watch out for me as well as that-that thing. My being here put you in greater danger." A shudder tore through her at the thought that in having to watch out for her, Walt might have been killed himself.

"It's dead," Walt said in a comforting voice. "That's what matters." Then, with a short burst of laser fire, he dispatched the smaller creature, too. "Come on," he urged, leading her toward the door.

Her feet moved with leaden steps. He helped her up the steps where she leaned against the railing.

Walt kept a protective arm on her waist. "I should never have left you here alone."

"I'm okay, Walt, really." She let her gaze wander over his broad shoulders, his arms, his torso, searching for any injury, no matter how slight. "Are *you*?" Suddenly, she straightened and searched the horizon, panic consuming her. "Oh my God! Did Kevin show up?" Walt wouldn't have followed one of those creatures back here alone unless he had to. "Where are Charlie and Dan?"

"They should be on their way home by now. I left them waitin' for the sheriff and checking the fence line." Walt gripped her shoulders and studied her face. "There's no good way to say this. Groman's dead. At least I think he is." He dug in his back pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Unfolded, it revealed a bloody, bent piece of metal. "Do you recognize this by chance?"

Sabina took it from him. At one time it had been a fine piece of silver. Now, gouges marked the surface and the edges had been torn into uneven points and indentations. The carved, intertwined initials could still be made out, however.

"This was his. He said he won the nugget of silver with an impossible hand of poker. He had it made into a clip to hold all the other money he'd win in the future, he said." She traced the letters with her finger. "His initials were the touch that made it his. If I'd stayed, he might have marked *me* with his initials. Kevin liked people to recognize his possessions."

"So he wouldn't go anywhere without this?"

She looked up, handing him back the damaged clip. "No, he wouldn't."

Walt stared at the silver for a second and then wrapped it in his handkerchief again. "I'd say that takes care of Kevin Groman, then, and probably the men he brought with him. The hover-car is still there, and Dan and Charlie found remains not far away from it."

Bile rose in Sabina's throat. She glanced back at the barn. "Do you think one of those things killed him?"

"I think *that* versa killed him, a little earlier today about twelve miles away from here. The small, black thing is a grenett. Even they're capable of taking out a man if it has a mind to. Once Groman and his men got out of their hover-craft, they hardly stood a chance if they didn't know what to watch for."

"Oh, God." Sabina slumped against the railing. Walt stood beside her, his very presence a comfort.

"The sheriff said Groman was in a damned hurry to meet. I suspect they were planning where to lay to pick us off when they were attacked."

"Did you know what would happen when you decided to meet him out in open country?" She felt him stiffen.

"Did I know he'd be killed by a versa?" She nodded, studying his face. He clenched his jaw, meeting her gaze. "This is a dangerous place. Especially for arrogant, off-planet assholes who think the universe exists just for them." He gestured toward the barn. "The possibility existed that he'd be versa prey even if he came to the ranch."

"Did the sheriff know?"

"Truthfully, honey, I don't think the sheriff cared much either way. No one likes being talked down to and pushed aside because someone else thinks he's as important as God. The sheriff is satisfied Groman's death is an accident, and he's sent word back to Earth. You're free, Sabina."

Walt looked away. "Suppose I did plan an advantage for Dan and Charlie and me by suggestin' Groman meet us out on the ranch. Would you hate me?"

"Never." She felt him relax as though it was she who let go of the tension.

Pushing the horrible way Kevin died to the back of her mind, she took a deep breath and let it out, free from worry and stress, free from having to look over her shoulder at every turn. Free to be a wife.

"That's twice I cheated death. If Kevin had found me I doubt I would have lived to see Earth, and there's no way I could have escaped that creature. You saved me from both."

"I'm sorry you had to see that thing out there. If we'd had any idea this rogue would reach the ranch, I never would have left you alone. Thank God you're all right."

"I should have had the gun with me."

"It might have made things worse. Who knows what you might have shot? It surprised you."

"But not you."

"I've been tracking it for five days. When I was pretty sure it headed this way, I circled around to get ahead of it. I just barely made it in time."

"Thank you, Walt."

"Do I have to keep telling you? I'll—"

"Keep me safe." She smiled and he gave her a smile of his own, one that showed dimples and desire. "I believe you."

Walt said all along he would protect her. She'd never doubt him again.

* * * *

Later that night, Walt stepped out of the shower. Toweling his hair, he examined his face in the mirror. At twenty-nine, his young face showed the years of hard work in the double suns. He didn't know if any woman would consider him handsome at this point. He wondered if Sabina ever would, if she could possibly find him as desirable as he found her. He expected a woman as hot and sexy as Sabina would only become more so as the years passed, whereas he feared his handsome years were behind him.

Self doubt overwhelmed him. She knew his brothers and loved them, but she said she loved him based on stories Charlie and Dan told her. How would she feel when she came to know him for herself? Dan accused him on occasion of being hard and unfeeling, particularly in regards to Charlie, whom Walt thought felt too much.

"Make sure you show Sabina the kind of man you want to be, not the bastard you are," he told his reflection.

With a towel wrapped low on his hips, he pulled the bathroom door open. Sabina stood at the dresser, wearing a white dress. A mess of curls fell from the crown of her head to frame her delicate face. Lipstick colored her lips and blusher tinted her cheeks.

"Pretty dress," he said, leaning on the doorjamb. The words he wanted to say couldn't make it past the lump in his throat.

"Intergalactic Brides provides each of us with a wedding gown. I understand sealing the contract is usually preceded by a ceremony of some sort."

"I'm sorry. We jumped the gun, I guess."

"That's okay. We'll have our own ceremony."

She took a step forward. Stopped, took another step, and stopped. Across the room she came in that halting march that somehow moved her hips in a sensual sway. Walt's heart started to race. With each step, she undid a tiny button down the front of her dress until she

paused to let the white confection drop to the floor. She took his breath away.

"Is that a corset?"

"Yes. It's part of the bridal package. I suppose some marriages need the kick of a sexy outfit to set the mood. But we don't, do we?"

He licked his lips, unable to take his gaze from the sight of Sabina in the white, lacy scrap of material. "No, we don't need incentive." His dick ached with need. As sexy as she looked, he couldn't wait to see her in nothing at all.

She glanced down. "This is the only feminine thing I own. I wanted to wear it for you on our first night together in our home."

"You don't need things to make you sexy, or more beautiful, either. You're gorgeous all on your own. I want to touch you all over, and yet I'm afraid to."

She walked toward him, bringing a waft of scent with her.

"You smell good, too."

She grasped the towel and gave it a tug, sending it to the floor. "It's from the rose soap." Her hand settled on his cock. With firmness, she stroked to the base of his shaft and back up. He shuddered with need.

"It's nice." Little exposure to words of romance had him sounding like an idiot. "You're even more beautiful than I could imagine."

She smiled as though knowing how hard this small talk was for him. Then she used a language they both understood, giving his dick a sensuous twist. He hissed in a breath and used all his willpower to keep from taking her on the floor.

"Let's not waste any more time," she said.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed, the bed where he slept for eleven years trying to concentrate on what he had and not what he wished for. Now they were one and the same.

With unsteady fingers, he undid the corset laces, revealing Sabina's body inch by inch. The lighting in the truck hadn't allowed

him to see her clearly, and she hadn't been spread out before him like a feast for a starving man.

Her body stunned him. Smooth and white, soft and warm, she trembled as he skimmed his hands along the curve of her hip.

"Do you love me, Walt?"

"God, yes." He brushed his lips across her belly. He hadn't asked her about birth control. If she wasn't protected, she might already have a baby growing inside. Or maybe he'd put one there tonight. His cock grew longer, anxious to be put to the test.

"Then take me, Walt, now."

Her words freed him to do what he'd been dying to do since that night in the truck. Testing her wetness with the tip of his cock, he fit the crown at the opening of her pussy and eased in. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He reached under her, holding her soft, round ass, and lifted her for a tighter fit.

He filled her completely, perfectly. "You feel incredible," he whispered. Her pussy muscles gripped him as he pulled out. Her sheath caressed every bit of him as he sank back in. He would have to revise his lack of faith in heaven. Making love to Sabina Sheridan defined the concept. "I'm going to investigate every inch of your body and enjoy every minute."

"I hope so."

He pressed a finger to her ass, all the while molding her torso to his. His cock caressed her clit with each drive.

"Your cunt was made for me. We fit perfectly, Sabina."

"Yes," she sighed.

"I'll need you forever." He nipped her earlobe.

She nuzzled his neck. "God, Walt, you feel so good."

He took her mouth. She sucked greedily on his tongue. Her nipples scraped his chest, her nails dug into his back. Faster he drove into her. She moaned, adding to the frenzy he fought back so he could prolong the pleasure they shared. Heat started low in his balls and rose like lava in an erupting volcano.

Suddenly, she threw back her head and fixed her gaze on his. Her pussy contracted over and over, pushing him beyond limits. Splintering waves of pleasure radiated through him. His hungry mouth trailed down her neck to the place where her pulse beat wildly. He thrust hard, flooding her with his seed.

Minutes passed while they floated back down to the bed in their room, while they found their breath and their hearts slowed to a normal rhythm. Walt rolled to her side, cradling her to him.

"Walt! Sabina!" Dan's voice cut through the house.

"We're home," Charlie added.

Sabina giggled into Walt's shoulder. "I just thought of another home improvement, Walt."

He stroked her arm and kissed her temple. "Lord, woman, you're gonna be the death of me. What now?"

"A bigger bed. And a strong one. Who knows what the four of us might get up to, adding to the Sheridan clan?"

His heart swelled with love. All he knew was, the *S* in the Triple *S* once stood for the three Sheridan brothers. Now it had new meaning—sexy, seductive Sabina.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A few years ago, Dee S. Knight made a career move that finally made getting up in the morning fun. During the day, her characters killed people, got married, became drunk with power or sober with responsibility. And sex. They had *sex*, over and over. In her computer, anything could happen to anyone. Writing about sex—and all that other stuff—was so much fun, Dee decided to keep at it. Sex, murder and mayhem is how she spends her days. Her nights? Well, that's between her and her dream man, childhood sweetheart, long-time hubby.

Dee loves writing erotic romance and sharing her stories with you. Now she adds ménage to her work—same romance, more steam. Enjoy!

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