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STEPHANIE BECK
POPPY'S PASSIONS

Back Cover Copy

Can Poppy find the courage to risk triple the love—and triple the heartbreak?

Poppy Maguire is tired of being a loser. Emotionally neglected as a child, she wants to find the courage to leave her family and the job she hates. She desperately wants to make a change. Little does she realize how much of a change sexy brothers Cody, Michael and Trevor Paraby will bring to her life when the friendly shoulders they offer turn into so much more.

Comfort turns to passion and Poppy learns what life could be like in the arms of not one, but three men who love her. But what happens when the pink line on a pregnancy test doubles and she's expecting twins, courtesy of a Paraby?

The brothers blow her mind by offering her the family and love she's always longed for. But do they realize what they're in for? Cody is moving a little too fast, Michael may not be in for the long haul, and Trevor is a bit self-centered.

In order for Poppy to have the extraordinary love she fears she hasn't earned, everyone is going to have to do some growing. But can she break free from the bad seed of her abusive family and have the courage to bloom?

Highlight

The door to her room opened before Poppy reached it. There to greet her were her men. Much like their dads they were in various stages of dress, rather undress, but unlike the older versions, she found these men irresistible and wasn't feeling so sleepy anymore.

"Hey, babe." With only his tight boxer briefs holding Trevor in, she was suddenly approaching perky. "Why are you up again? Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine." She wrapped her arms around her middle to keep from touching them. "I was chatting with your parents. Why are you guys up?"

"You weren't here and Cody tried to kiss me," Michael said. He shot a dirty look to the youngest brother, and she fought back a laugh. "I was going to kick his butt quick and go back to bed."

"Oh, so you have plans." She let her robe slip, baring her naked shoulder in the dim hall light. "You wouldn't consider changing them for me, would you, Big Guy?"

They each immediately perked up, and Poppy felt her lips curl in a self-satisfied grin. Not every lesson on their path to a great relationship had to be painful.

Poppy's Passions

by

Stephanie Beck

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Dedication

For my granddad who used to sneak into my notebooks and read my stories. He said they would be pretty good if I left out all the kissing. Miss you, Old Guy.

Acknowledgments

A new writer always has a boatload of people to thank. There are the ones who inspired and prodded until the story was actually written out (thanks Tanner and Mom). There are the ones who read it and loved it just the way it was (thanks Amanda, Pam and Jaime). Then there are the ones who saw the potential and helped make the story and writer better (thanks Jo P and Lyrical Press).

Chapter 1

Seven. During Poppy Maguire's long drive across town in rush hour she'd had time to rank her puke and aggravation filled day as her seventh worst. Considering her year, seventh was no picnic. A never ending wave of disappointment and pain, nothing stood out positively in the last ten months. Today's disgusting developments seemed on par to finish the horrible year, demanding the white Russian in front of her have friends before she called it a night.

Her stomach growled hard, reminding her of the lunch she'd missed in favor of showering off kid puke. Poppy blamed the adult. Grandma brought the poor guy in with terrible stomach pains and finally confessed to giving him half a dozen red velvet cupcakes for breakfast. Both the boy and his guardian had both felt much better after he'd unloaded a gallon of red chocolate sludge.

Poppy needed to send the new ER doctor flowers. When the boy's hiccups started, Dr. Webster pushed her in front of him and let her take the brunt of the mess. She paid the price, shoes and scrubs ruined with red stains. Life as a traveling ER nurse in San Antonio's hospital system was never glamorous, but most days she managed not to wallow in puke. Some days she just got really lucky.

With the incident finally far enough away to think about food, she remembered the only things in her cupboards were stale Pop-Tarts. She grabbed a sticky menu when the brown lettuce in her crisper came to mind. With drag racers in town from all over the country, the usually quiet neighborhood bar was packed. It wouldn't be easy in the crowd to get an order in, but she stretched higher in her seat to catch Nick's attention. The older bartender had a soft spot for her.

Instead of Nick's friendly brown gaze, she connected with the Christmas green eyes that had haunted her the past week. She shook her head, telling herself the owner of those eyes wasn't the reason she'd been to the bar every night for seven days. A drinking problem, developing one of those was probably less detrimental than getting mixed up with the man behind the green eyes.

Nick appeared from the kitchen and slid a basket of chicken wings, potato wedges and celery sticks in front of her. "From Cody across the bar. The celery's the best I could do for fresh vegetables, so make sure you eat it."

"Ah, thanks, Nick." Mouth immediately watering at the scent of chicken, she took a moment to send a celery salute to the owner of the green eyes across the bar.

The last few months had been touchy health-wise for her, and as a nurse she knew she'd lost too much weight too quickly. Her hair had thinned, which was why it was trapped in her trademarked ponytail or on the worst of hair days, twin pigtails. Her sisters said she looked great, finally losing her baby fat, but she felt like a ghost of herself and not strong in her new shape.

Cody must have agreed because every night since they met he sent her food or a drink with cream in it. He let her eat, unlike most men who would have immediately moved in, but he kept an eye on her, ambling over after she'd made a dent in the big basket of food. He sidled up on the stool beside her, motioning to Nick for another beer before setting his Stetson on the bar.

"Tough day, darlin'?" His tone was a little lazy but not nearly as southern as the Texan men around her.

"A little," she admitted, offering him chicken and fries.

"Eat." He handed cash across to Nick as she took another bite. "Trevor won his race today, so we're in town another week."

"That's exciting."

It didn't bother her that he didn't pursue the topic of her rough day, because they'd learned in earlier conversations Cody's stomach couldn't handle even her most tame hospital stories. The poor guy got twitchy and pale just at the mention of needles.

"You don't have to get back to your ranch?"

"Nope, late summer is sort of a lull. My dad is handling the day to day stuff for a while, and at least for another few weeks it'll be quiet. In September we'll start selling stock and getting ready for winter. Do you have any time free this week? Maybe for a movie or some sightseeing?"

"I thought we've had this talk, Cody. Actually I'm pretty sure we've had it the past seven nights. I have no plans of being the middle of a Patrich brothers' bed party."

There was no missing the whispers about the Patrich brothers in the small corner of the city she'd moved into. They were a little infamous with the women from drag races past. It was no secret the three shared women, one woman at a time among them, at the same time. One of the girls she worked with told her all about her own crazy night with the brothers. Poppy was, of course, properly horrified and disgusted by the thought of three men doing incredibly wicked, erotic things to a poor unsuspecting woman.

Or at least she kept telling herself she was. The reoccurring dreams she had with her playing a starring role between the three delicious brothers screamed otherwise. She couldn't say she'd been invited, but she was woman enough to recognize the looks Michael and Trevor gave her when she'd met them a few days earlier. She hated to admit it, but she'd looked right back and liked what she saw.

Guys in the past had liked her. They thought she was cute in a neighbor girl sort of way, with her curly hair, freckles and short stature. The Patrich brothers were no different.

"Pretty Poppy, you're selling us short if you think we wouldn't make sure you had a good time," Cody told her, easy as always, no push in his tone, no pressure.

"Oh, I just bet ya'll would," she muttered, and he grinned. "But what next? I know you boys go through women like tissues when you're in town, together and individually. I have no aching desire to become one of the pack of castoffs."

His grin fell away, and he looked thoughtful a minute. She wondered if she'd hurt his feelings. He was a single man, they were all single men, and the woman she'd heard from had in no way been coerced or lied to. Poppy didn't mean to make it sound bad, just honest.

The Patrich brothers had all the makings of men she would want to keep. She didn't want a taste of something only to be denied more when they moved on to the next woman. She'd played those games before, and it wasn't something she wanted to repeat.

"Cody, I'm sure you, Michael and Trevor know how to show a girl a good time. You're nice guys, and really I had fun the other night over dinner. Like I said though, I've been used and thrown away too often to do it again. And to willingly do it is crazy, so it's probably better to be friends. Wouldn't it be nice to have a friendly face the next time you come to San Antonio? One that doesn't want anything from you guys but to hang out and have a beer?"

He patted her hand with his big, work scarred one. "Yeah, darlin', that would be nice. Friends are good. So pal, tell me the edited version of your day. I had some ribs earlier I would hate to lose, but tell me what you can."

* * * *

Another shit day. Poppy pushed tears away from her tired eyes. Worse than shit. Horrid covered in terrifying, trapped in shit. She took her time as she walked into the bar, simply named "The Bar," and hung up her wet jacket. It had to be raining, of course. Heaven forbid such a horrible day end with sunshine. The crying sky mimicked the tears shed by the heartbroken families who'd left the hospital without their loved ones. She didn't question why she turned right instead of left to her apartment, and refused to examine the reasons why she sought comfort in the bar, but she knew. Alone wasn't what she needed, not after her day.

"Hey, babe," Trevor Patrich greeted when she numbly sat beside him at the busy bar. "You okay, Poppy?"

Trevor, unlike Cody, was scrawny to the point he worked out every day to maintain any sort of muscle mass. She'd learned very early he was a teaser and consummate smartass. He didn't push into mean, which she was grateful for because she couldn't stand bullies. She'd seen him stop a fight between two racers more Cody's size than his own with a joke and a round of beer, and she respected him.

He thankfully had a slew of redeeming qualities, because from what she'd heard he also liked to race dragster and chase busty blondes. She wasn't quite blond, more strawberry blond, and she was far from busty, but tonight his brown eyes were earnest, sweet and warm with concern.

"Bad day." Leaning into his boney shoulder, she tried to put more distance between her heart and the heaviness weighing on it. "I had a really bad day."

The friendly arm he slipped around her shoulder was the only warmth she'd felt the entire day. "I'm sorry to hear that, sweetheart. How about you come over to the booth we've got and tell us about it? We ordered a couple of pizzas, so you can eat and unload on us."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Come on."

Waiting in the booth, Michael and Cody were on separate sides. They studied her progress across the bar with the interest that always seemed to be in their expressions when they watched her. It wasn't as disconcerting as the first time she'd felt their combined gaze upon her. The more she knew about them, the less their attention frightened her. She wouldn't say she was completely comfortable, but it wasn't a bad feeling.

Contrary to what their sexual preference implied, they weren't touchers. A pat on the back, a kick in the ass maybe, but nothing more than appropriate brotherly behavior. From what she'd seen, it was the norm for them. Their sexuality was nowhere near gay or incestuous; she just wasn't sure what it was exactly.

"Another toughie, darlin'?" Cody asked. He stood and motioned them into his side of the booth. After she and Trevor were settled, Cody pulled a chair to the end of the table and sat. She saw Michael wave to the waitress and knew they'd been expecting her to sit with them eventually. Poppy hoped they weren't too disappointed in the lack of good company she could offer.

"Yeah." Accepting a thick, milky drink from the waitress, she took a deep gulp before she elaborated. "Some days I really, really hate being a nurse."

"The accident on interstate ninety-four?" Michael asked.

"Yep."

The brothers waited, watching her as she sipped her drink more slowly. They watched her a lot when they were all together. The looks came in varying degrees of heat but when she glanced up, genuine concern was the only thing in their eyes. She needed to talk, and she could see they wanted to listen.

"Five dead." The words didn't feel right coming out. Nothing about the day felt right. "It was a daycare group going to the zoo."

"Honey, I am so sorry," Trevor said.

"All the kids died within minutes of getting to the hospital—six months, two years, and four years old," she explained numbly. "There were two boys and one girl. Even though her skull was crushed her little pigtails were still in the neat bows her mommy tied. God, her mom cried. Buckets. I've never seen anyone cry that much."

Her voice cracked, and she hated that the words were getting stuck again. The charge nurse at the hospital told the nurses involved to visit the trauma therapist on staff. Poppy went, but the words hadn't come then either. The therapist was nice, told her to let it settle but to visit soon to talk. That much trauma couldn't be contained for long. She didn't want the pain anymore.

"The caregiver was a fifty-five-year-old woman with a perfect driving record and brand new triplet granddaughters. She died after a major heart attack took over and we couldn't stop it. Then the other driver came in. A forty-three-year-old male who was texting instead of watching the road. He'd been pulled over for texting while driving before, but it didn't stop him. He was so busy with his messages he didn't notice the daycare van until he had it crushed against the cement median."

Cody swore. When she looked up she saw Michael held his forehead on his fist, shaking his head. It was a natural response, one she'd seen in the hospital before. It took a moment to process that sort of ugly reality, especially the preventable kind. When she took another breath to finish purging the anger and hurt, Trevor settled his big hand over hers.

"Maybe I'm in the wrong field but when we were using the paddles, trying to get his heart going, I wanted to stop." It was cold-hearted and not something a nurse should ever say, but it was true.

Away from the hospital she didn't have to fake how "sad" she was. There had been a general consensus about how nice it would have been if they'd at least saved him. One life out of five would have been something. The widow had been in the room as they worked on starting his heart and while her tears had touched Poppy, she didn't feel the world had lost much in the death of a man who murdered four people because he was impatient.

"After all those babies came in, broken and dead because of him, I wanted him to die. Then he did. His wife cried and I know he has a grieving family, but I still can't say I hope he's in a good place. If there's a hell, I hope he's burning in it."

The helpless anger brought back the tears she'd fought so hard to stop after she'd helped clean up the little one in pigtails for the mortuary attendants. She couldn't think of the baby girl's name and maintain the small piece of sanity she had left. She took another drink and saw Michael nod.

He was a private detective now, but for years he'd worked as a police detective in Los Angeles. There was every possibility he'd seen worse, which didn't help, but the compassion he offered meant something more because of the shared occupational trauma. He nodded again.

Trevor freed her hand and hugged her close. Gratefully, she sank into the warm comfort his embrace offered. At work she would have told the therapist how she felt and would have been sent home to unwind and mentally prepare for her next shift—alone. Even though they were staying quiet in light of the story, she didn't feel alone with the Patriches.

Waiting out the silence, Michael didn't let Trevor do all the comforting. He reached across the table, peeled her hand away from her drink, and held it in his warm one instead. Though his hair was prematurely graying she couldn't help but think the touches of silver in the blond made him look more handsome and trustworthy. Everything about the way he held himself said he was strong and capable yet approachable. He was somewhere between Cody's hugeness and Trevor's lean muscle, and though average looking in every way, the comfort he offered in a single touch was far from commonplace.

No token responses were offered. It was like they knew no simple Hallmark blurb would make a difference, so the booth's occupants were quiet. Silence worked better than all the trite statements could. Trevor held her and let her bury her face in his shoulder. Every breath of the spicy cologne he wore added another layer of comfort. The constant pressure around her hand from Michael's grip was the most innocent yet powerful contact she'd ever experienced.

Human decency demanded most to comfort in hard times. She saw it every day at work. Surrounded by the Patriches it felt different, deeper. They were her friends. Made in seven days they weren't the deepest of buddies, but even though she didn't have many friends, she recognized good ones in the faces around her.

The therapist recommended she surround herself with people who loved her. The obvious choice would have been her father. Most of her sisters lived in town too, all within half an hour of the hospital. Instead, she'd gone to a bar to meet men she'd known for only a week.

No part of her believed time spent with her sisters would make her feel better. They'd never forgiven her for her part in their mother's death and no comfort was offered. Ever. Going to her father would have required tracking him down at a school function. In the unlikely event of him setting aside responsibility, she knew there would have been nothing but a lecture on personal accountability offered. Her nieces and nephews were sweet but too young for the kind of fellowship she needed, and it wasn't fair to dump her problems on preteens.

College and nursing school should have left her with some friends and support, but graduating had been a struggle. Between classes, clinicals and her family, she'd barely passed her boards. There was no one to blame for her pitiful social life but herself. Since meeting the Patrich brothers, making friends and accepting comfort became a priority.

They were making her trust people to do the right thing. For too long it seemed she couldn't take a step without someone trying to screw her. She'd gone to school for a career she despised because her father expected it. She'd screwed herself by not standing up to her father, but for a time the idea of his approval had pushed her.

The betrayal took a different look with her sisters. For a while it seemed they'd set aside the past, forgiven her for being born and escalating their mother's breast cancer. They'd encouraged her to date and had even set her up on double dates with their husbands' friends. For the first time in her life, she'd held their approval. Under their advice she'd gone further with a man than she ever had, and when pregnancy followed they'd been thrilled.

Engagement parties and baby shower dates were set. She received happy cards from her two sisters in Arizona, promising to visit and stand with her at the wedding. High on approval and affection she'd let herself be led. The last trials to get her nursing license had still challenged but in the evenings she was with her family, laughing and surrounded by what she'd thought was love.

The affection fest lasted as long as the pregnancy and engagement. A full ten weeks. When it ended, she not only lost the baby she wanted, but the fiancé she thought she loved and the affection of her father and sisters.

Courtesy of the backlash she was up to her ears in the self-worth issues she'd been ignoring. It was a bitter pill, but her family didn't want her around. Ignoring it hadn't lasted in the long term because it wasn't right or normal, but it was the way her world worked. Once she decided to focus

on making friends, she found co-workers who were decent and showed the smallest glimmer of acquaintance respect. Her whole life she'd been begging for scraps of affection and was finding more with near strangers than she felt from her family.

There was very little to be proud of in her life, but she finally knew her goal. Respect. She couldn't make her family or anyone else love her. But she could love herself. Progress was being made in her rebuilding, and she liked the woman she was becoming. Self-help books and psychology manuals helped her redefine what friendship and family meant. Watching how other women behaved in the hospitals she worked at gave her examples of who she could be, if she chose.

Deciding on the main focuses was easy. She had to like herself first, all the books said so. The next part was finding a way to respect men. Her father had not given her an example of a loving man. Her fiancé had played the part but failed in practical application.

The Patriches were expediting her missions. It amazed her how they managed to make her feel so good about herself with only their quiet constancy and bone-deep decency. She felt their respect and affection.

When the food arrived, the waitress tried not to be awkward but unlike the rest of the bar, Poppy knew the tone at their table was somber. She slipped by a minute later with extra napkins and it was something Poppy knew would prompt the brothers to leave a better tip.

She let Trevor tease her out of the dark mood she'd embraced since the accident. The last year had taught her that one negative always led to another, but the Patriches were putting a stop on the pattern. Trevor fed her pizza and nudged her to smile. There was no way to make her day disappear, but she appreciated their best efforts to push back the ugliness for at least a little while.

"Hell, is it already ten?" Trevor said when his cell beeped and vibrated wildly.

"Yep." Michael tossed a few bills on the table. "Do you have it from here, Cody?"

The youngest brother was already moving from his spot to allow the others to exit. His eyes found hers, and the smile that curved her lips was small but it was one he'd helped make. "Yeah, I'll keep her company."

"Sorry, Poppy," Trevor said. He took an extra moment to hug her again. "We're meeting with one of the racing promoters at ten-thirty. It's been in the works for a couple months now or I'd tell them to go fuck a cow or something."

She couldn't stop her involuntary burst of laughter. It was the first in too long. She hugged him hard. "That's so sweet, Trevor."

"I am a sweet guy," he admitted, and she laughed again.

"Thank you." Because no words she knew were enough to thank him for all he'd done, she reached over and kissed his cheek.

"You're welcome, babe." He reciprocated with a gentle kiss to her temple. "Make Baby Boy dance. He'll bitch about it, but he will if you want."

"Okay."

He stood and moved to Michael's right. Side by side there was no mistaking the family resemblance. Michael was fair to Trevor's dark hair but the jaw line was the same, the cheeks too.

She smiled at the handsome picture they made. "I hope your meeting goes well."

"I wish we didn't have to go," Michael confessed and bent down to kiss the cheek she offered. "I'm glad you're feeling better. This kind of stuff, it's hard and it scars but it doesn't stay heavy longer than we can stand it. You'll be all right."

"I know, thanks." She felt a small loss as she watched the two brothers weave their way out of the bar, leaving her with Cody.

Of the three brothers he was the least intimidating, his demeanor not at all demanding. That nature allowed her to accept his first drink earlier in the week. He was the kind of guy most women felt good with, big and down-home handsome with incredibly strong shoulders and ripped arms. The look was one of a man who was no stranger to hard work.

He avoided perfection by balancing the shoulders with a little belly. It wasn't a beer belly, just the softness from eating too many cookies. She found it impossible not to like a man with all Cody's attributes who also ate peanut butter scotcheroos.

Conversation stayed light after the older brothers left. Telling stories came naturally to Cody and he pulled her in with tales of his beautiful home. Spending time on a farm had never been a driving desire for her, but after his descriptions of the land and animals, she wondered if she'd been missing more than she thought by staying in the city.

When he described the barn cleaning equipment she nodded and smiled but let her mind wander. She was grateful for the random, innocent conversation with Cody. The day she'd endured would have been the last straw a week ago. She would have broken, but today she had Cody, Michael, and Trevor, and they'd refused to allow her to wallow in anger and grief. Two hours after arriving she was smiling and happy to be alive when bitterness had tried to consume her.

Trying adamantly to deny the attraction she felt to the brothers had occupied every hour of her last seven days. The week had been a treat, she'd been able to focus on other things instead of just herself or her family issues. The Patriches had invaded her mind often and kindly. She tried to convince herself she wouldn't get involved with them in anything more than friendship. They weren't part of her plan. They weren't what she thought she needed.

At last call she found herself heading back to their hotel. Lying to herself was an option. She could convince herself she didn't want to be alone, but that would be an excuse she didn't want in her life anymore. The truth was she liked being near Cody. He smelled right and his voice made her want to keep listening to anything he said. She loved how his head tilted down so he could hear her as they walked.

Her mind was already full with possibilities of where the night could go but neither acknowledged what could be, simply walked and enjoyed the warm San Antonio night. It felt like borrowed time, and for the moment she was the woman she wanted to be.

He held her hand. She tried, but she couldn't remember the last time an adult besides the brothers had held her hand. The simple contact he shared was a small thing and once he offered, he didn't take it away. Through the lobby and even in the elevator he kept their hands embracing, not letting go until they were in his suite and he needed both hands to close and lock the door.

"If all you want is company and a cuddle, Poppy, they are yours with no strings attached." He led her further into the luxurious suite, giving her time to look around as he turned on lights.

"Thank you," she said as she followed him to a center sitting room. "You're a nice man, Cody." She laughed when he grimaced. "That's a good thing. You can be sexy and still be nice, not all men can be, but you pull it off well."

"Yeah, whatever you say." He sat on the couch, and though there were plenty of places on the surrounding chairs and sofa, she sat beside him. "So?"

She shrugged. The situation was a new one. She didn't go home with men and with only one lover under her belt she wasn't sure of proper protocol or procedure in leading up to going to the bedroom. Actually now that they were in his hotel room, she wasn't sure if it was what she wanted.

"I really don't know, Cody."

"Fair enough." He put his Stetson on the backrest and settled his arm around her shoulders. "Want to watch a movie?"

"I don't think so." His delicious scent was different from Trevor's, not as refined but equally as engaging. It went right to her head and made the thoughts she was trying to maintain scatter.

"Ah, are you still hungry or thirsty? I could order something, or the fridge has stuff in it."

There was something amazing about being with a man like Cody. He didn't demand anything or expect her to act a certain way. She'd been pressured and made to feel obligated to do things before, and she hated herself for giving in. She despised her tendency to give everything when someone demanded she earn their affection. It took a week but she knew Cody Patrich wasn't a man who did those things. She didn't feel like he required reimbursement for his attention, and that made it sweeter.

She had power with this man and his brothers, power she'd never experienced with anyone. Snuggling in, she smiled when he looked down at her. She pressed her lips to his, the warm softness drawing her deeper. There was much promise in one little kiss. Desire ignited in the intimate touch. She thought she understood passion. The pleasure of making love wasn't an unknown, but compared to what she felt with Cody, her past experiences were boring beige.

"Cody?" She almost didn't recognize the breathy tone as her own.

"Yeah, darlin'?" he replied, still pressing little kisses to the side of her mouth and cheek.

"Just...just be nice, okay?" It felt silly saying it out loud, but she knew how close she was to breaking. What happened between them didn't have to be love. It didn't have to be forever, but to keep moving forward she had to know he wouldn't knock her back to square one in a moment of insensitivity.

"Of course, Poppy," he said and shifted his hold to her face, cradling it gently in his big hands. "I'm going to take very good care of you, sweetheart. Forget everything you've heard about me and my brothers. Put away all the other stuff you've been worried about and relax with me tonight. I promise you won't regret it."

"Okay." She rubbed her cheek to his hand, no longer trying to deny how much she wanted his touch. "Where's your bedroom?"

Cody lifted her like she weighed nothing, and his strength thrilled her. He carried her to one of the closed doors, and she turned the knob and pushed. The city lights dimly illuminated the room, which was nearly full with the huge bed. Wicked images jumped through her mind at the sight of the acre covered in silk.

Something special was going to be shared between them in that space. It was going to be in turns wicked and sweet, like Cody. She couldn't ignore, though, that she'd only known him a week. She tried to set it aside, but the fact that they hadn't shared much physically beyond less-than-innocent kisses made her tense.

"You just say stop if you don't like something, all right? If anything doesn't feel right, tell me and we'll do something else. This is all about you," he said as if he was reading her mind. "I'm not going to do anything that you don't want, darlin', and if you want to go back to cuddling, just say the word."

"I trust you, Cody." His promise eradicated her last doubtful thoughts. She'd been drawn to him even when she'd been suspicious of his motives. Now she knew him, even if it was a short courtship, and knew he would never intentionally hurt her. "I trust you to make everything all right."

He was smiling when he settled her on the bed. She scooted back until she sat against the headboard and couldn't help but return the smile. He was hard and big, bigger than any man she'd seen outside of medical books, and just the sight of him excited her.

With an ease speaking of his comfort with her, he stripped. Already excited, his growing erection put to rest any doubts she had about him finding her attractive. He switched a bedside lamp on before turning off the overhead light.

He sat on the edge of the bed, leaving some distance between them but wasting no time moving closer. She couldn't possibly resist the expanse of warm male suddenly before her. Her fingers needed activity, and as he began to rub her arms with his big hands she let hers explore. His body hair was wiry and dark, a rough delight to her palms as she dispensed with hesitant touches and caressed him with her whole hands. She didn't want to miss any part of him.

If she was to wake up and it was all a fantasy, she wanted it to be one hell of a dream. Her hospital issue scrubs provided little resistance once he started untying the feeble strings. If the plain white cotton of her panties and bra weren't the sexiest things, it didn't matter because he removed them with the same efficiency as her clothes. For a moment he paused to look, and she forced herself not to squirm under the sudden scrutiny. There were reasons she'd only made love in the darkness, but the lust in Cody's face made her forget what they were.

Not waiting for any more invitation than her being naked and willing before him, he took her nipple in his mouth. Sucking just hard enough, he made her arch for more of the new sensation. Everything felt bigger, harder, and stronger than anything she'd ever experienced and she wanted it all.

She felt like a new toy as he explored every inch of her, taking his time with her breasts but also rubbing his hands up and down her arms to make her even warmer. Delightful friction burned everywhere he touched. She wanted more. As intoxicating as his touch was, her hands felt empty.

His pupils dilated when she reached closer and wrapped her hand around his cock. With the lights on she should have been more shy, but she wasn't, not when she was getting responses like Cody's. He pulled her hand away from him and shook his head when she protested.

"I'm already not going to last as long as I want, Poppy." He kissed her mouth to silence her protest and moved closer on the bed. "We've got all night, darlin'. Let me handle this first part."

She'd promised herself she wouldn't be "handled" anymore but she was happy to make an exception for Cody Patrich and his incredible lovemaking. He tangled his fingers in her hair and pressed searing kisses down her ear and neck, the sensitivity of the area already ignited from the other teasing.

Despite his request, she found she couldn't not touch, so she took biting kisses from his bare neck and shoulders while her hands explored his muscled back. He stiffened under her touch like he was reining in his response before he shifted lower and sucked hard at her nipple.

Never before had she felt so damn potent. Her kisses were making him hotter, and he didn't bother to hide it from her. She thought he might ask her to stop again but instead he moved back to her neck, kissing and stroking it harder, distracting her with the suction and pressure in the soft hollow below her ear that nearly had her coming all on its own.

She tried to escape the sensual attack but arching her neck away made her hips thrust closer to him. He groaned at the new contact, pulled her flat to the bed, and moved over top of her. Body to body, there was no missing the size of his penis. She'd seen it when he undressed, and her brief contact earlier assured her it was as thick as it looked. Feeling it so close to the part of her weeping for company extrapolated her appreciation.

A shattering wave of desire came with the position change and sent shivers up her body, but instead of taking, he moved aside.

"Cody!"

He replied with a bracing hand on her hip. She thrust her pelvis up, shamelessly demanding what her body needed. After a quick squeeze to her hip, he moved his hand closer to her center. His long fingers brushed by her belly to rest at the top of her mound. Another protest at the delay threatened, but his mouth clamped around her nipple again and she was torn between sensations.

To match that glorious cock, his fingers were hard and thick, and as his mouth stayed busy at her breast, a single one slid easily into her weeping cunt. The superior weight of his body was the only thing that kept her grounded as explosive sensation took over. He kept a slow pace, alternating filling her to bursting and leaving her wanting more.

Almost from the moment she saw him, she'd wanted and firmly told herself "no." Finally saying "yes" was proving to be exactly what she needed. She moaned when he added another finger and delighted in the delicious stretch as her body tried to accommodate the change. She pressed into him harder, demanding more, but he kept his pace and pressure while also flicking gently over her sensitive clit. Juices poured helplessly from her, easing her enough for another finger.

"Oh, hell yes," he muttered, kissing back to her mouth. "Now you're getting ready for me."

Despite the expert foreplay, she wasn't surprised when the stretched feeling turned to discomfort as Cody finally lay between her legs and slid in. He was careful, but it felt like she was losing her virginity again. The tautness didn't last long, not with the kisses and caresses he continued to rain on her aroused body as he waited, still and patient inside her.

Patience wasn't high on her list of virtues with him so hard and thick inside her. When she rolled her hips in encouragement, heat flashed in his emerald eyes and in no time they were both enjoying the other, touching as deeply as they could. He rocked inside her with easy strokes, leading up to a rhythm she gladly met as each thrust left her a little breathless.

She was shocked. What had always been a mundane sort of pleasure was insane with this man, but she gladly embraced the insanity. His height took his mouth from her breasts as he thrust inside her, but he reached her neck easily and pressed hot kisses there. The amazing sensitivity paired with the sensual assault between her legs made her gasps become moans that filled the room. Her body was in charge as she mindlessly met every touch. Every motion brought her closer to what was promising to be the best orgasm of her life.

She could see it, visualize the explosion of feelings and pleasure as it gathered, and she lifted to him with more urgency, grinding her clit to his pelvis when he was at his deepest. So close. He wore a condom but she could feel him finish in the jerk of his body, the pulse of him throbbing inside her just before she climaxed.

"Cody!" she wailed, so close to coming, the frustration drawing tears. "Please!"

"It's okay, baby girl, we'll take care of you."

She shoved herself up to her elbows when another voice pierced the room. Cody was out of her and lying on his side next to her, barely winded from his efforts.

"This is all up to you, baby. I'll take care of you or Trevor and Michael can join us, but it's your decision," he murmured, kissing her ears and the shallow places beneath them as he continued to tease her engorged clit with his slippery finger.

She trembled and ached with unsatisfied desire. Her tortured body was screaming at her mind to hurry the hell up and make a decision. Standing in the doorway, their chests bared, but jeans firmly in place, it was impossible for her not to want Michael and Trevor. Cody was beside her, keeping her on edge and doing something incredibly erotic to the crook of her elbow with his tongue.

“Did you plan this?” she croaked, helplessly arching into Cody but he wouldn’t finish.

“Maybe a little,” he admitted. “It’s still up to you though, darlin’. I meant what I said earlier. You decide what you want. Trevor can be in you in about four seconds, and Michael’s wanted to get his mouth on your pretty breasts since the first night he saw you.”

She moaned in answer and fell back onto her shoulder blades, her resistance gone at the sweetly erotic words. “Yes, both of you, hurry.” She grabbed Cody’s hand when he tried to back off again. “You. Quit teasing.”

The sound of masculine chuckles didn’t bring her out of her near thrall and when Cody’s promised four seconds were up, Trevor was between her legs. He wasted no more time before impaling her soaking vagina, picking up where the bigger, blunter Cody left off.

The differences in Trevor’s longer, slimmer cock changed the sensations enough to delay her orgasm while her body grew accustomed to the new angle and depth. Impossibly, the change compounded the pleasure Poppy thought couldn’t get more explosive.

With Michael’s mouth on one breast and Cody’s on the other she was losing what little was left of her mind but that, she knew, was their intent. She wanted their kisses and was a little shocked when she realized any of their kisses would satisfy. There wasn’t a clear preference to who she desired. It answered one of the many questions she’d pondered while repeatedly telling herself she didn’t want any of them. She was so glad she’d let them prove her wrong.

Michael kissed up from her oversensitive breast, to her neck and chin to cover her mouth with his. His lips devoured hers as Trevor continued to pillage her aching vagina with his own long deep strokes until he was swearing and pounding so fast and furiously it snatched her breath away.

Without breaking the kiss, Michael took Trevor’s place as he swore and moved slowly away. Before she could catch her breath from the peak Trevor drove her to, Michael settled between her thighs and rolled to his back, taking her to sitting astride his very willing and ready cock.

She’d only ridden once before, and her partner hadn’t enjoyed it. Tension seeped into her body as nerves and uncertainty filled her at the position change, but Michael wouldn’t have it. He helped her position her feet beside his hips into a squat, and she felt a whole new sensation come over her. With his help, she found a rhythm. When she lost her balance he helped her find it again, giving her all the time in the world to explore the new sensations.

Lost in herself and lost on Michael’s cock, she felt herself go over again. With every motion she stayed in the incredible moment of climax. Such hang time was not in the realm of her experience. Her own manipulated orgasms were small, but they took the edge off. The ones her men were demanding redefined “edge.”

The fingers on her ankles began to dig in harshly, and she opened her eyes to find Michael's face a contortion of pain and pleasure. Groans coming in surround sound filled the room. Trevor and Cody were watching, their eyes wide, each with a fist on their own hardened cocks.

She'd never been surrounded by so much sexual power. Three gorgeous men looked at her like she was the only woman alive. The smile curling her lips felt nearly predatory in the amount of satisfaction it held. In her moment of distraction Michael reached up and pinched her nipple, hard. It sent her from enjoying the aftershocks of an orgasm into a new one.

The men took turns bringing her to climax over and over, using their mouths when she regrettably grew too sore for their wonderful cocks. They switched to her mouth too, where she all too happily learned what they liked under their friendly, carnal instruction.

It was a "bar hookup in a hotel," she admitted to herself in one of the infrequent lulls, but she didn't feel cheap or used. Letting the friendship and affection grow had been the right decision, she knew because as they lay together and played, the ease between them continued to grow.

They laughed when she had time to catch her breath, adding all sorts of things to her bedroom playbook. Nothing had ever inspired her to laugh in bed with her former fiancé. Nothing. Laughter and smiles were aphrodisiacs with the Patriches. If she was smiling or screaming her pleasure, they looked happy.

It was long after the sun rose on the San Antonio skyline that she cuddled down between Michael and Cody in Michael's clean bed. Exhausted and unresponsive, Trevor crashed on the floor and she let him after the others assured her it was what he did.

The phone rang hours later, and Poppy reluctantly let go of her dreamless sleep. She pushed herself to her elbows when Cody swore.

"Fuck. Okay, we're on our way."

"Who?" Trevor muttered from his place on the floor.

"Mom. Dad had a heart attack," he answered, jumping out of bed. Poppy winced when he kicked Trevor as he passed. "Move your ass, it's Paul."

"Dad?" Trevor said, instantly awake and off the floor like he hadn't been nearly catatonic hours before. "Can we get a flight?"

"Yeah, Mom already booked it. We've got an hour and a half before it leaves." She watched as Cody quickly dressed and began throwing Michael's things in a suitcase. "Poppy, I'm sorry—"

"Don't worry about me." She moved from her warm spot and found her pants half under Michael. Tugging them, she realized he slept like the dead. Apparently Trevor wasn't the only one with sleep quirks. "I hope your dad's okay."

"Thanks. I wish we had more time," Cody said. He absently handed her the bra he'd stripped off her the night before. "Fuck"

She looked up to see Cody holding his fists to his eyebrows, the tension in his body a familiar stance after medical emergencies. There was nothing he could do. Being a strong man made admitting that incredibly frustrating.

“Take a deep breath.” She went without her bra and threw on her top instead. After pulling on her pants, she closed the distance between them and pressed a calming hand to his chest. So often tragedy stole a person’s breath. It was hard to do the most basic tasks, let alone think clearly without fresh air. “Now think. What can I do to help? Do you need a ride?”

“No, we’ve got a rental,” Trevor answered when Cody only covered her hand with his. Despite the situation, the middle brother looked impossibly handsome in a wrinkled t-shirt and jeans, his curly black hair disheveled, old sneakers untied. “Settle the fuck down, Baby Boy. Dad’ll be fine until we get there.”

Cody nodded and patted her hand again. “Can you try to wake Mike while I check out?”

“Sure.”

Since there wasn’t time for a shower she reluctantly accepted their offer for a ride. They would have insisted anyway and she didn’t want to add to their frustration, so she climbed into the backseat of their rented SUV. Michael was the least shaken at the news it seemed, but she figured he handled stress better, so he drove. She realized how close Cody must be to his father when he stayed pensive and held her tight on his lap during the ride to her apartment.

She hugged him the whole way and gave the limited reassurances she could. Heart attacks were scary things and she hoped, no matter what the future held, they would get home in time for their father. Before he let her off his lap, Cody promised what they’d started wasn’t over. Michael and Trevor added their instant agreement. They packed an hour of big city safety tips between hugs and kisses in the four minutes before they had to go or miss their flight.

Back at her apartment, and fresh from a shower, Poppy wondered if she’d dreamed the episode. During her failed, brief pregnancy her dreams had been crazy, vivid and though she’d never had one starring three brothers spending a night worshiping her, the question still edged into her mind. Had she dreamt them?

She wandered through her apartment, checking her empty answering machine. Her sex ached like hell with each step and her nipples rubbed uncomfortably against her t-shirt. The friction the night of sexual excess had caused wasn’t pleasant, but she couldn’t wipe the smile off her face.

There would be no pretending it was a dream. Reality was better. Poppy Maguire had an incredible night with three delicious brothers, individually and all at once. *Menage*, not *trois*, but while her French was non-existent the Spanish was *quatro*, maybe a quartet.

The thought made her laugh, surprising because she never thought she was the kind of girl who could do something sexually daring. It went to show how hungry she’d been for contact and emotion, even if it was only one night. She wanted more, she couldn’t lie to herself. She’d been prepared to feel the recriminations of reality settling in, yet she felt fine, like it was perfectly normal to spend the night being loved by three men.

They weren’t going home to the best circumstances and she worried. She wished she’d gotten a phone number to check in on them, or even given hers. She had their hotel’s number but it didn’t do any good with them on their way home. The Patriches hadn’t lied to her yet, and when

they promised to be back, she wanted to believe them. That didn't mean she wouldn't end up disappointed, but for the first time in months she had a little faith in someone, even if it wasn't herself.

Chapter 2

Four Months Later

Cody stared at the checkbook. Dinner was over and he had to get payroll done before he could read the book Paul had left on his desk. They were considering adding a few Irish shorthorns to the cattle bloodline, but he was still researching options.

The book lay next to the stack of medical journals he'd been reading, reminding him of Paul's heart attack. Thankfully it was only a minor attack, but it had been enough to scare them all.

Duane was a hell of a doctor and had done CPR the whole way to town, keeping Paul alive. Cody couldn't imagine life without any one of his parents, but during the flight he'd thought about the possibilities.

Paul, Duane, and Thomas loved his mother, and one was his father, though all three claimed the right. The arrangement made the family tighter than most. To lose one would have left a hole he couldn't fathom repairing. The closeness extended to him and his brothers. When they grew up they left the ranch, but Cody had always known they would all return one day.

Living alone held little appeal for him. It was one thing to be out in the pasture surrounded by nature's quiet, another to go home to an empty house. He'd done his two years of college but staying in the city never crossed his mind.

Michael and Trevor made friends easily, but Cody knew they preferred life on the ranch. It was the leaning toward family that made the three of them sit down one night and really talk for the first time in their lives.

Over a case of beer, they'd hammered out the details of the sort of relationship they needed. They could do more, protect, and care better for one woman they all loved, rather than three they loved individually.

It wasn't easy to sacrifice exclusive sexuality and love. The fact they would share one woman in bed and wait their turn when they wanted alone time was a hard thing to accept, but they were willing to compromise and make sacrifices for the woman who deserved the best they could give her.

Their fathers' relationship was a great ball of sacrifice stemming from their childhoods. Thomas and Paul's father died young, leaving their mother with nothing but twin sons to raise alone. She'd struggled because there was no one to help after Simon Paraby's death. His dads and brothers talked about her often. She'd been a spitfire, able to take care of herself even during the hardest times.

Simon's brother Sam had been around when their grandma struggled, but Cody heard from his own mother why Grandma Paraby had never gone to him for help. Unlike Simon, Sam Paraby was a real bastard.

Duane was his son. He'd been a dirty, bruised boy. Because they shared a name, Thomas and Paul shared their food and toys when Duane's lunch bag was empty and he played alone at recess. Sam was an abusive drunk who killed his wife. The situation left Duane with mixed feelings, ones of regret for not being able to help his mother, but also of disgust for the one he'd been sired from. Thankfully, by that time Duane was nearly grown and the next year he joined the army.

Before he left, Duane and the twins discussed what an ideal relationship should be. They knew they were predisposed to screw up. Duane was terrified of becoming a drunk, Thomas and Paul were afraid of dying young and leaving a woman alone. They decided if they had a chance, it would be best if they worked together.

Thomas became a lawyer while Duane nursed on the battlefields in Vietnam. Paul turned what had been a floundering farm into a paying ranch. When he got back, Duane went to medical school and became a doctor. The relationship with Mary hadn't been an overnight event, and they had struggled because they all had dominant personalities. Thirty-seven years later they still worked together and put aside their full desires to see to the happiness, welfare and pleasure of one very special woman.

Cody couldn't ask for better parents. When he and his brothers had been young, they'd heard the fights and arguments like all kids, but unlike their peers they'd also seen the content, happy look on all of their parents' faces, especially their mother. Cody wasn't a genius but despite his humble brain, he was able to see he and his brothers would have been settling if they'd done anything but find the same arrangement.

It wasn't an easy prospect. Most women who'd been raised with the qualities they needed—honesty, loyalty, humor and compassion—were one-man sort of women. Their fathers counseled them to not settle for the first woman who would have them. Cody took the advice to heart, because a lifetime with the wrong mate had all the makings of hell in his mind.

In college, women his own age hadn't interested him. Even when he found one who was mature and intelligent, there was always something he couldn't get past. Michael had been serious enough about a woman to become engaged but it hadn't worked out. When he canceled the engagement the only explanation he gave the family was "she wasn't the one." And Trevor, Cody knew, never focused enough to be in love.

They'd been patient a long time. Years, in fact, until Michael's thirty-fourth birthday when they'd buckled down and began the search for the right woman. They'd started going out together, but always found themselves culled apart by women looking for a single man for a singular good time.

When it was just sex they were perfectly capable of making their own good time, but the desire for more kept them focused on finding the woman for all of them.

Michael was getting older and wanted a wife and family, so he'd taken the first turn looking for a woman. He'd tried, but he attracted timid, nervous women who didn't suit what they had in mind.

Second oldest, Trevor tried next. He was charismatic, and Cody envied his ability to turn acquaintances into friends in minutes. So he'd had good luck meeting women. The problem was, he would take anything blond, busty, and wearing a skirt back to their hotel. They found women who enjoyed being with all three of them, but they hadn't been looking for permanency. To be fair, there hadn't been a single one they'd wanted to take home to their mother, but it gave them hope and practice.

That ended when the last one was more equipped under "her" skirt than any of the brothers, so the job of scouting possible mates fell to Cody.

Again, they'd been patient. The local women weren't interested, so he headed to Billings and Missoula. All the beautiful women he'd seen, all the interesting women he'd spoken with hadn't raised more than casual interest on his part.

Then he'd seen her across a tiny San Antonio bar. Still in her work scrubs with her fuzzy hair in a ponytail, his eyes locked on her and wouldn't move away. The woman for them was Poppy Maguire, and she was seven hundred miles south.

If not for Paul's heart, they'd have already been back.

"I know that look," Trevor announced, striding into the office with Michael on his heels. "Someone is thinking of chicks."

"Of one chick," Michael corrected. "That's the kind of look only Poppy Maguire can bring on. Have you heard from her?"

"No," Cody answered, accepting the beer Michael offered. "I called the bar we hung out in, and Nick said he hadn't seen her in weeks. The only thing I can think of is to go back down there ourselves and find her."

Trevor flopped on the sofa, propping bare feet on the arm. "Bartender, good thinking. I couldn't find anything either. Her dad's a dick, by the way, hung up on me twice. There's a race on Thursday in San Antonio. I'm thinking that might be karma telling us to get our asses down there."

"This Thursday?" Cody pushed away from his desk and checked his wall calendar.

Trevor flicked on the gaming system he kept in every office and looked Cody's way while it booted. "Yep, this Thursday. Can you handle three more days, Baby Boy?"

"Can you, Middle Man?" he shot back.

Trevor sighed, he was the smartass of the group, probably of any group, but Cody knew he was also the most sensitive of them. "I don't know. It was one week and one night, not even the whole night, and I miss her all the fucking time. How did she get under my skin that fast?"

"I miss her smile and the way she smells. How did she always smell good after working all day at a hospital?" Michael commiserated. Usually he was more introverted in his thoughts but Poppy changed them in little ways. For Michael, spending time with her had opened him up some. "I can go Wednesday."

"I'll have to let Dad know I'm going, but Wednesday should work for me," Cody agreed, excitement bubbling in his chest.

"Damn, she's got us whipped already. We are so screwed." A prediction they all hoped would become fact as Trevor blew up a virtual prison. "Wednesday it is."

Chapter 3

Poppy bit back a sigh as she wrapped another set of stitches. It was Thursday evening yet she'd been dealing with weekend quality injuries all day. Stupid was equal opportunity, but the bulk of her work usually happened Friday and Saturday. Car accidents, broken arms acquired by falling off ladders, kids shoving paperclips into sockets, usually were contained to the weekend when people had time to be irresponsibly active. Lucky her, the weekend had started early.

"Don't let these get wet," she advised the older man, who'd sliced open his forearm on a rusty muffler. "The tetanus shot and antibiotic should help against infection. Come right back in if you spike a fever ibuprofen won't settle, got it?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded his bushy head profusely. She hoped he would show the sense most men didn't and actually come in if he got an infection, but didn't have high hopes.

After walking him out, she stopped in the break room for a breather. She was tired and incredibly hot. Even in November with the temperatures cooling and the heat kept low in the hospital, she was sweating like mad. She added another layer of deodorant and smoothed her blue scrub top over her belly, hoping the antiperspirant would last until she escaped the floor again.

The reason for her increased temperature was settled comfortably south of her heart and not so pleasantly north of her bladder. Two reasons actually, courtesy of the Patrich brothers. She'd googled them, even tried, badly, to bribe a hotel clerk. She needed to find at least a phone number so she could tell them what was happening. In month four she was finally past the most dangerous months and wanted them to know that one of them was going to be a father.

Their response was something she couldn't anticipate, but she hoped since they played their games with no problem, facing the consequences would come as easily. Parenthood, especially the unexpected kind, was a big deal and they had a lot to talk about. Wherever they lived, visitation, if they wanted it, would be a nightmare.

They were her friends though, and if friendship meant as much to them as it did her, they would be fine. It wasn't like she expected anything more than minimal child support. She had a good job, a bigger home and the means to care for the babies. Keeping communication open and friendly seemed like the best plan.

In passing, she remembered Cody saying he liked kids. In a few months there was a one-in-three chance he would have two of his own or have two new nieces, so she hoped the other brothers felt the same.

She was proving to be a "fertile myrtle." The first time she'd trusted Steven, loved him and knew a pregnancy would be a welcome, wonderful event. The most recent one had condom failure written all over it. The Patriches had gone through more little packets than she could remember counting, and one or more had apparently broken or slipped.

The first pregnancy ended too soon, but she'd felt the stirrings of life before. Conceived in love she'd thought at the time, utterly romantic even if they weren't married. Steven was a friend of her father's, a respected, prestigious doctor and her family had raved about him. It had been the easiest thing in the world to love him and bask in her family's approval for the first time in her life.

The first few weeks were wonderful. Steven, at the end of a long, unhappy marriage, was thrilled to be starting out so well. He wanted children very much, more than he'd wanted her.

Amid wedding plans and baby talk she miscarried. There was no reason the doctor could ascertain. One day she was pregnant, the next she was not. The doctor was very kind and explained it wasn't uncommon in the first twelve weeks. She'd been at ten.

After rapid consideration of her news, Steven decided not to chance another childless marriage. When he recommended they wait to marry until after their next try at pregnancy bore a healthy baby, she understood exactly what she was to him, a brood mare. When she rejected his idea, he told her to think it over, but a week later he called and broke off their relationship completely. She learned in vitro finally worked for his ex-wife and they were back together, thrilled and expecting a baby.

When she'd started sleeping more and puking five weeks after her night with the Patriches, she'd gone immediately to her doctor. Like the last time, she did everything the doctor said and at week twenty-one, her body was pleasantly filled out and healthy. Even her ass was back at its fighting weight, helping balance her stomach, which pressed against her top, big with twins.

"Poppy, we've got a multiple victim car accident," her partner on the ER floor announced over her radio. "Feeling okay, hon?"

"Yep, I'm on my way."

Serious cases were triaged to the left wing where nurses were ready for the more trauma filled patients. With her balance off and touchy stomach she requested to work the right wing, and after throwing up during an emergency tracheotomy, the request was mercifully granted.

She scrubbed her hands before entering the cubicle Tammy pointed her to. With her nurse's smile pasted on and senses braced to deal with more of the blood and gore she despised she stepped in.

"Trevor Paraby?" she asked, checking the chart and assessing the amount of time the patient would require. "Can you tell me your date of birth, please?"

"That's me, it's July—" he replied, then cursed loud. "Poppy Maguire! Where the hell have you been hiding?"

"Trevor?" She felt herself pale at the sound of his voice, and when she looked at him her world spun.

He hopped down from the table and steadied her with the arm not strapped to his chest. "Are you okay, Poppy?"

"Um, fine." She fought hard to swallow her anxiety as bile and tears threatened. "You need to sit so I can check your arm. What happened?"

“Some fucker was pissed I won a race and rammed me,” Trevor explained, retaking his seat on the papered table, though he looked ready to hop down again at any time. “Probably had to do with the quarter million he lost.”

“My goodness, I guess.” Her stomach settled quickly as it usually did, unless she threw up. “Okay, you’ll go for x-rays. Tammy will take you but it looks like a clean break from what the EMT onsite reports. It’s a very typical injury from car crashes. You’re lucky.”

“Can’t you take me, babe?” Once again he was off the table and wasted no time in pressing close, his pain tolerance very high, she thought, to sport an erection with a broken arm. “I’ve missed you like crazy, pretty girl, the way you hug with your whole body, those sweet lips, and your pretty ass.”

His sweet words made the frustration of the past months boil. “You could have called, Trevor Paraby.”

“Baby, we always travel using our alias names, otherwise we get stalkers and shit. We were going to tell you as soon as we found you, but Cody didn’t get your number and you don’t have a landline. You also don’t put your cell number down for anything.” Her surprise must have showed because he continued. “We looked, believe me. We had a line on you but your dad turned out to be less than helpful, same with your employers. You should be pleased to know your rights have not been violated in any way, the assholes.”

“You called my dad?” Completely horrified at the thought of what conversation could have passed between him and any of the brothers, especially Trevor, she tried to think of the last time she’d spoken with her father.

Trevor was slouching lower so they were face to face, watching her as she managed her anxiety. “Yeah, I said I was coordinating your school reunion one time and offered a fair prize the other. You’re still pale, baby. How about you sit for a minute?”

“I need an x-ray, Tammy,” she said lifelessly into her radio instead of replying to his concern. “Non-critical.”

“It’s an hour out. The right side has some majors coming in. Need a doc for pain meds?”

“No,” Trevor answered, moving closer to wrap his free arm around her shoulder.

“Not at this time.” The scent of leather and grease hung on his clothes but the cologne she remembered was there too, filling her nose and turning her on even though she didn’t want it to.

“Okay, go ahead and take your half hour if you want. It’s slowed over here. Knock on wood.”

“Here, baby,” Trevor said, fishing a juice box out of his backpack. “You don’t look good. Are you working a double shift or something? Are you sick?”

Before she could answer, screaming came from the hall. She heard Tammy order someone to stop and started out of the cubical to help. Unrest in the ER was a fairly common occurrence, desperation and anger often accompaniments to emergency situations, so she’d heard yells before. The hospital employed several security people stationed near the ER to help keep the patients and staff safe.

The flimsy curtain of the cubical ripped open before she got to it. A young man all in green leather gear, much like Trevor's, stormed in and jerked a gun from his vest. His eyes were wild and angry as he looked for a target and settled on her. Sudden fear had her frozen in place. He lifted the gun and shot twice. The first shot came before she could react, but the second was skewed when he was tackled to the ground. Security was shouting, patients and staff screaming in terror.

"Poppy—Poppy, are you okay?"

She realized she wasn't on her feet. Sometime in the moments she'd blinked, Trevor pushed her to the floor. It was cold, colder than she would have thought. She tried to remember how she'd come to be face down on the tiles, but it was a shocked blurb in her mind. Trevor was above her, protecting her, though his weight was making the ceramic covered floor even harder.

"I think so," she answered, but felt herself slipping into shock, the cold of the floor sinking into her pores.

"Hell, she's bleeding. Michael, she's bleeding. We need a doctor in here now. Poppy was shot," he said, progressing to a shout. "Damn it, we need a doctor over here."

Poppy. Shot? Poppy was shot? No way. She would know if she was injured, let alone shot, she thought groggily. She was a professional after all.

Chapter 4

“Come on, beautiful. Open those eyes for me.”

The voice was so compelling Poppy figured she'd have to be dead not to comply with the innocent request. Dull pain roaring to life assured her she wasn't dead, not when the simple action required much more effort than anticipated. She blinked the fuzzy, too tired feeling from her eyes, and knew it was from medications. She'd given enough of it to recognize the effects.

“That's my girl,” Michael crooned in sweet, deep tones she recognized from their time in bed. “You have the prettiest blue eyes. Did I tell you that the last time I saw you? I should have if I didn't. I've missed how they sort of sparkle, even now they're twinkling up a storm. How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“Michael?” She'd dreamed of them so often she couldn't be sure he was real.

“Yes, ma'am,” he answered, taking a gentle hold of her hand. “I'm right here with you. How are you feeling?”

She squeezed his hand as discomfort grew. “Kinda' rough.”

“The doctor should be around to see you again soon,” he promised. “Do you need me to call the nurse?”

“I'm okay for now.” The pain was helping to clear her mind past the medication haze. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yep, Cody's with Trevor and both are okay.”

“What happened? Who was that guy?” She adjusted and found the pain was radiating from her left shoulder. “Ouch.”

“Yeah, ouch is right,” he agreed and moved a pillow to brace her arm better. “The good news is the guy with the gun is a horrible shot and only grazed your shoulder. He's one of the racers Trevor was competing against.”

“The one who lost all the money Trevor said he won?”

“That's the one. So, good news, you will be okay. The bad news is, it's going to hurt for a while and it's going to itch like crazy once it starts healing. Now, beautiful, do you think you're up to answering a few questions for the detective? We know you didn't see much, but he needs a statement. It should only take a few minutes.”

“Miss Maguire, I'm Detective Masterson.” He offered his badge before she could ask. Not that it occurred to her the grandfatherly man with kind eyes was anything but a detective. “Michael's right, I won't keep you from your rest. I need to ask you a few questions. First, can you describe what was happening before the attack?”

It only took a few minutes to explain the bulk of what she saw. She gave the details she remembered while the detective nodded and wrote notes in his tiny pad. Michael stayed by her side and helped the detective reword things when her medicated mind didn't understand the questions. She knew Michael had been a detective but seeing him in action reaffirmed her assumption of how good he was.

"A guy in green gear ripped the curtain and pointed the gun at Trevor. I was in front of him. I think Trevor must have pushed me to the floor," she said absently. Her eyes widened as the words sunk in. She couldn't stop her hands as they flew to her stomach, still big and dormant.

"Babies are tough, Ms. Maguire," the detective told her with a reassuring smile. Beside her Michael's comforting hand went from stroke to grab. "That's all I need for now. We have the suspect red-handed, you could say, as he was still holding the gun when security got to the scene. It was a scary time with these boys dogpiled on him, but they kept him from shooting anyone else.

"We're hopeful for a full confession and ideally he'll wise up and plead guilty. I'll be in contact with more details when this comes up in the justice department. He's here on a special visa, so things might get tied up for a while. It could be a few weeks or months but I've got your information, so I'll be in touch."

Michael shook his hand and sat again, quiet until the detective closed the door behind him. She watched him think, an animated process with him as he was probably gauging how big she was and counting back weeks.

Finally, he reached out and tentatively laid his hand on her bulging stomach. "Pretty big." He cleared his throat. "Were you pregnant before our night?"

"Nope. Twins are tucked in there." Relief rushed with the words and she was grateful for the detective's assumption and interference. The opening line had always been the one she couldn't get when she practiced what she would say to them. With the block gone, the words came easily. "Apparently a condom or two or three failed."

"And you couldn't find us. And we couldn't find you either. Even at your apartment."

"Trevor told me about trying to call. I hate telemarketers so I never give my cell number. My apartment was too small for me and two babies. I bought a townhouse on the other end of town before I got too big to move myself. I've been there two months now, and I like it." She was rambling but couldn't stop. "It's a nice house, and it's closer to the places I work. I've been worried about telling you, even though I've wanted to. This whole situation is going to be so complicated." There was more to say, more fears and concerns, but her stomach had other plans. "Gonna puke."

Michael was quick on his feet, she would give him that, and they avoided a major mess with a well placed basin. The nurse, not Tammy, administered nausea meds along with another dose of pain medication before Poppy was transferred to an observation room. Trevor was in yet another room, finally being seen and having his arm treated. Cody was staying with him until he was released.

There was nothing to do, nothing left to worry about with her secret out. The men she'd wanted were finally close and relatively okay. There was so much to discuss and decide, but her arm hurt and the tired from earlier had become exhaustion. As the excitement ebbed, so did her ability to focus. Michael must have recognized the signs, because he nicely cleared the room of her co-workers and concerned hospital administrators.

The weekend promised to be an interesting, exhausting few days. She closed her eyes as she relaxed against her pillows, extra warming blankets tucked around her as the shock and injury reversed the constant overheating she usually felt. Michael sat beside her, a magazine he wasn't reading in hand. He was watching her and every so often his eyes strayed to her belly.

"Still there." Her words were slurred but clear enough for him to smile.

"They sure are," he agreed. "You should sleep, sweetheart. Trevor and Cody will be over soon and you know how noisy they are."

"Yeah."

They were quiet a minute, the beeping of her monitors the only sound in the room. She fought the drugs and her own exhaustion. So many unknowns remained and she wasn't sure what she would face when she woke.

"I'll be here when you wake up."

She turned her head and wondered how he knew she wasn't sleeping.

"I can tell," he said with a little smile. "I spent some time pretending to sleep in hospitals. If you'll let the medication do its job and rest, I'll tell you all about it when you wake up."

"You won't leave? Promise?"

"I promise."

Chapter 5

As was the norm with the Patrich brothers, whose real name was Paraby, Poppy found herself doing things she wouldn't normally even consider. Case in point, flying first-class, in a window seat, on her way to Montana. Good to his word, Michael had been beside her bed when she woke and hadn't left. Even when the simple hospital stay turned into a three day event he remained by her side. Cody and Trevor added to the rotation during her misery, and she'd never had to be in the cold room alone.

She'd spent the last seventy-two hours throwing up and running to the toilet, courtesy of one of the many horrid bugs that seemed to nest in hospitals. To their credit, the Parabys took it in stride. They called the nurses at first when she was ill but by day two they'd had no problem helping her themselves. Without her asking, they assisted her in the shower, helped her wash her hair, and took care of her with more determination than skill.

The nurses were envious, her associates having no qualms about telling her how lucky she was and Poppy understood why. She knew exactly what kind of men they had to be to try so hard.

Cody, who didn't do well with illness, did what he could, leaving the heavier things to Trevor and Michael. They didn't necessarily enjoy the tasks but didn't pass out either. Cody had done his part by remembering her favorite foods and finding the warmest, softest socks she'd ever owned at ten o'clock at night after she said her feet were cold.

The time was also passed with long talks. She listened to each of them as they tried together and individually to convince her to come to the ranch. For now it was a visit, a couple weeks to get to know them better. The babies deserved to know their father's home, didn't they? Michael had driven in that point.

Cody was quick to point out that he and his brothers were the reason behind her fatigue and injury, though she refused to lay blame on anyone but the shooter himself. The pregnancy was something she was happy to endure but when he brought up backrubs, long baths and chocolate chip cookies, he'd snagged her attention.

Of course, Trevor's promise to fuck like bunnies had some sway of its own.

Only two other passengers were flying first-class, both of them sleeping toward the front, so it was quiet, and Poppy needed quiet to think. Three men. How was she supposed to pick one? The past four months hadn't diminished the way she felt about them. They were good men, wonderful men, and she loved being around them. There was no doubt in her mind she would love one if she chose, but what about the other two?

She'd never felt she inspired jealousy but between these specific brothers, she thought it could happen. They might be fine sharing her, but it would stop, of course, after she chose one, and she knew she had to choose one. How else could they make anything work, especially with

kids? Kids needed a mom and a dad ideally. More than one of either in the same house didn't seem like it could work, and she wasn't going to subjugate her kids to a socially objectionable lifestyle just because she liked sex with three men. If all three never found their way to her bed again, she would be just fine.

One. She could choose one.

Then the other two would go on and be happy with other women. The thought of whoever she didn't choose in the arms of someone else made her grit her teeth. She didn't even know the women yet, and she already hated them. Worse, she hated herself for the jealousy she felt toward the fictitious hussies.

They'd only been reunited for days, but the familiarity had roared back from where they left off months before. They felt like what family was supposed to be and even if it seemed wrong, at least it was nothing like her father's family. She wanted to keep them. Every single one. Being accepted and loved by each individually and mutually was the only thing that made sense.

"Hey, what's wrong, baby?" Back from the bathroom powwow they'd left for ten minutes earlier, Trevor sat beside her. "Feeling okay?"

"No." She wasn't surprised when tears started to fall.

"Excuse me, ma'am? Can you get my wife some ginger ale or something to settle her stomach?" she heard Trevor ask the flight attendant while Cody got out several little white bags.

"It's not that." Though Lord knew it could be at any moment. The title he used didn't help her predicament either.

"We can have you to the hospital in Missoula in about an hour, beautiful," Michael said, alarm in his eyes though his tone was calm as usual.

"How the heck am I going to pick one of you?" she muttered to herself and covered her face, rubbing the heels of her hands to her eyes.

"Did she say one of us?" Cody said. "Did one of you tell her she had to choose?"

"Fuck no," was Trevor's reply, Michael shaking his head when she peeked through her hands. "Baby, you don't have to choose."

"Yeah, Poppy," Cody continued where Trevor left off, quiet and reassuring while he said the craziest damn thing she'd ever heard. "All three of us want you. Just you. It's a thing I think we've always known. We work better as a team, hell you know that from four months ago."

"But..." Accepting the pop and blanket from the flight attendant, she tried to hide her unease until the woman left. The question pounding at her mind had been one she'd considered even before their night together. It wasn't an easy thought to entertain, let alone voice, but she had to ask. "Where else does this go? Do the three of you, um...is it because you have sexual feelings for each other?"

Dead silence met her question, and she sank deeper into her seat as she waited for some kind of response.

"Whoa, did she just ask if we like fucking each other?" The toneless whisper from Trevor put into words the question she'd been too afraid to ask.

"This doesn't go anywhere near what you are worried about," Michael answered, ignoring Trevor, as she'd found was the best answer to most of his more outrageous comments. "I love my brothers but not in a sexual way and that won't ever be an issue. For us, a relationship like this is another version of family. It's a completely personal decision the three of us have made, and has absolutely no base in us wanting each other. Individually we need the woman we love as protected and happy as possible. We know that means all three of us working together."

"The guy who had the most determined sperm doesn't care if those babies are his biologically, just like the others don't care if they're actually uncles," Cody added. "We want you to be our family, Poppy. No other woman. Today, you're very important to us, and I think we matter to you too. Tomorrow, it's going to be more and the next day and the next until someday, real soon I'm thinking, there's going to be a hell of a lot of love in our home."

She settled her head on Trevor's shoulder as she thought. It was an improbable sort of idea, but it sounded tempting. A family. Even when her sisters tried not to be bitter there wasn't a connection between them like she'd seen between other siblings. Her father was...unbending. If he'd ever known joy it was long gone, replaced by structure, rules and his stringent set of proprieties.

What they proposed wasn't something she was familiar with, but what did she know about family? Really. What made one better than the other or more right than another?

"I want a home and a family." The whispered admission was from her heart, but not an easy one to make.

"You've got one now, pretty baby," Trevor promised, squeezing her close. "No more worries about this thing, okay? I swear to God, Cody doesn't do anything for me. You've probably heard I like blondes, and that's what is confusing you. Michael may be blond but ug, old guys don't count."

"Yeah, right, and you're horrible you know," she said with a weak laugh.

"I'm always right, babe. It's good you've figured that out so soon." Trevor chuckled.

Silence stretched between them for a long minute, while she processed not only their proposition but what it could mean. Three men, one woman, her as that woman. It could be wonderful, she already knew that, but there had to be a down side. Something too good to be true in the equation.

"Would there be other men? Other women?" she asked in a little voice. There were so many questions she had to ask but wasn't ready for the answers. An idea was growing of what she wanted, but she couldn't allow herself to be shocked if they were picturing something else.

"Would you want that?" Michael asked calmly, raising a hand as Cody and Trevor immediately protested.

It was rare when she couldn't tell what people wanted to hear and looking into Michael's eyes she didn't know what he expected her to say. The past few days had been eye opening, especially where Michael was concerned. She knew he genuinely wanted her opinion free of pressure, which was why he'd shut the other two up.

"I wouldn't want others." The bottom lip between her teeth was sore from her nervous habit, but if they were going to embark on this fantastic plan, she needed them to be honest, which meant she had to do the same.

"Thank fucking God," Trevor blurted. "I might have tried for like a second to deal with it, but the thought of another dick in bed with us? No way. And another woman is just begging for trouble. Remember how those two chicks started fighting in Phoenix? Everything was nice and then, bam, crazy."

"I think we've got the right number," Cody agreed, and she was relieved Trevor was once again ignored, because she didn't want to hear anything more about their past conquests, crazy or not. "The three of us have spent the last few years looking for a woman to love for the rest of our lives, together, individually, and not just for sex. We want this visit to turn into you staying with us. We're willing to help you find a job you like, a place closer if you don't want to stay with us. We're going to support you whether it's helping with a new career or making sure you can stay at home with the babies."

"I vote for the last one," Trevor added. She could not imagine what would prompt his preference, and it must have showed in her expression because he continued. "Hell yeah, if you stay home with the twins then you'll probably breastfeed, and I'll get to watch. No other assholes in the mix though, babe, please. I can share you with my brothers because they are my brothers and we're doing this for the right reasons. Any other jack off and I'll end up kicking ass and taking names."

"That's...that's almost sweet," she replied and laughed at the pure outrageousness of his words. "Okay, we'll do this. The four of us will find a way to make this trip work and if it does we'll see what happens."

"That's all we can ask," Cody allowed, but she could see how pleased he was with her tentative agreement. "If you're willing, darlin', we'll make you the happiest woman in the country."

With every promise she felt herself being pulled deeper and deeper into whatever it was she was feeling for the men around her. It wasn't love, Cody was right when he said they weren't there yet, but it was something. Affection, not so subtle, was definitely there. Respect, growing every day, was also present. When she leaned in to Trevor's side again it was where she wanted to be and there was no doubt in her mind she was welcome.

The seatbelt light turned red. "Buckle up, beautiful," Michael said. "We'll be in Missoula in a few minutes. My truck is waiting in long term parking, so we should be on the road soon. Cody, you're driving this time and shut it, Trevor. I call backseat with Poppy. You two assholes are hogging her."

Chapter 6

Between flirting and getting to know each other, Cody had mentioned the ranch was in Montana, but once the plane landed Poppy realized she hadn't known exactly what that meant. She'd seen mountain ranges on TV and in books, but they didn't do reality justice. Located in the western part of the state, surrounded by the Garnett Mountain Range, the area was nearly enclosed by mountains shooting up on all sides.

Everything was supposed to be bigger in Texas, but Montana did big well too. The greatness in size wasn't the only thing that caught her attention. The trees were equally astounding, like a giant Christmas tree farm all around. The early November air was chilly and smelled amazingly different from Texas, where for months at a time, dust was the main fragrance.

Like at any airport, security was a pain but thanks to their small flight size they passed through much more quickly than in San Antonio. Michael and Trevor kept her occupied in the gift shop for twenty minutes while Cody got the truck ready. She'd never had to wait for a vehicle to be warm enough to drive.

She thought it was silly and indulgent, at least until she stepped outside and got her first feel of Montana. Mentally she took back all her eye rolls and scoffs as she hurried to the truck where the heater was blowing. When Michael sat beside her, she buckled in and did her best to crawl beneath his skin even though the cab was warm.

The landscape changed as they drove out of the city. The trees and mountains, unfettered by manmade buildings and highways, offered a whole new definition of beauty. Texas didn't come close to the grandness of the Paraby's home state.

Cody was especially prideful as he explained his Montana and how he and Paul focused on cattle ranching and conservation. She realized they had more in common than she thought when he talked about leaving the ranch to go to agriculture management school. He hadn't enjoyed school, she could tell from the way he talked, but he'd used it as a means to an end, and the end was the land.

She loved that he was so animated and in tune with what he did and envied him his passion. He spoke of the land with such affection she couldn't help but be excited to see it. Trevor and Michael didn't have the same love for ranching but they added to Cody's monologue as they rode. She'd never been hunting, fishing, or even hiking much but she had a feeling she would be trying it all before long.

Driving up the goat trail leading to their home, Poppy envied Cody's ease behind the wheel of Michael's huge truck. The graveled grade was steep and though it was wide, at times it became impossibly windy. The hairpin turns had her grabbing Michael and holding tight, even as Cody drove with expert care.

The snow was bright white, reflecting the sun in a lit path between the trees. Growing up and spending almost her entire life in southern Texas, she was overwhelmed by the sheer size of the mountains and trees, the snow, by almost every single thing. While the cold air felt foreign and frigid, she still found herself intrigued by the differences from the world she knew.

"We'll cut a Christmas tree off that hill," Michael said, and she turned to where he pointed to rows of huge pines. "That's only eight weeks away. Can you take pregnant women on snowmobiles?"

"Poppy?" Cody asked.

"Hmm?" Turning her attention back to the conversation after watching a brilliant red cardinal fly into a wall of evergreens was one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

"Can pregnant women ride snowmobiles, darlin'?" Cody repeated, his half grin adorable in the rear view mirror.

"I don't know. I've never ridden one before, pregnant or not."

"We'll ask Duane," Trevor said, as they turned onto a precision cleared driveway with a charming, cabin shaped mailbox and little shed at the end. "Looks like he let Paul off full bed rest. About damn time."

"Who are Duane and Paul?" Comfortable under her jacket and Michael's truck coat with the heat blowing steady, she was ready for a few more answers. "Wait, Paul's your dad, right? He had a heart attack."

"It was a minor one. He calls it an 'episode' to downplay it sometimes, but Duane never forgets to remind him how close he was to a code blue," Cody answered. "And they are both our dads, Thomas too."

"Our mother's name is Mary," Trevor added. "And snowmobiles are just about the only way to get around here sometimes."

"Oh, so that's why you think this can work," she said, forgetting about the snowmobiles as relief flooded her. She wished the men had mentioned they had more than theory to back their relationship aspirations. "Your parents have a plural marriage."

"Yep. Polyandry, it's called with multiple husbands. They've been together thirty-seven years. Paul figured in our teens we'd go this route too. He always said to be patient and we'd know the right woman when we found her," Michael told her. He helped her adjust more snugly between his legs, stretched over the back bench seat as the ride pushed past the hour mark. "He was right."

"And Mom is going to be thrilled, another hen in the house and two baby girl chicks on the way," Trevor added.

"Oh, my goodness, that's your house?" Poppy asked, ignoring Trevor's words because the sudden presence of multiple father figures in their lives was an unexpected turn she couldn't think about. The trees had parted, and the sight before her was enough to make anyone go off topic. "It's beautiful."

“Yeah. Thanks. We built it three years ago with our own twelve hands. There would have been fourteen, but Mom decided to supervise after the dads almost came to blows over grout colors,” Trevor explained. “I broke my damn thumb putting in the kitchen cabinets and couldn’t work for days.”

“It’s that hard to play video games with a sore thumb?” she asked.

He wiggled them both theatrically. “It’s a little hard to work the controls in a thumb cast. And it was my space bar hitting thumb too, so programming was a pain.”

“Mom might have helped after the great grout fiasco,” Michael added, “but Trevor dropped a box of nails on her foot and Paul almost ran her over with the skid loader.” Poppy laughed because the affection in his tone assured her they’d laughed too. “It was for the best in the end really, things got real ugly for a while when Duane tried to drive it.”

A huge log structure with a high awning covering part of the circle drive stood proudly at the end of the road, imposing in its size but in a hospitable style. There looked to be two wings on either side of a tall A-frame axis, each with its own three car garage, all well lit and welcoming. Log facades were popular in Texas. Some even paid to have the real things trucked in to build homes with, but Poppy had never seen one with such character.

Lights blinked to life as the truck approached. Through the uncovered windows Poppy could see figures moving around, the isolated spot offering more privacy than any curtains.

Several buildings surrounded the house. She recognized a machine shed, chicken coop and barn down a split of the driveway a bit further up the road. They were all bright red, just like she thought farm buildings should be, and covered in fresh white snow. It was like something off a cocoa advertisement or a Currier and Ives painting, and nothing at all like the farms and ranches she was used to in Texas.

There was a sort of pretty, rustic perfection she found charming as she tried to take it all in. She felt things moving into place inside of her, a warming acceptance only encouraged when Michael kissed her ear softly.

She snuggled closer and sighed when he took a breath and said, “Welcome home.”

Chapter 7

Time was ticking, Michael thought as they pulled into the garage. He knew Cody and Trevor were also aware that their mother would descend upon them any moment. They hustled Poppy through their wing to her bedroom, promising the full tour after she'd freshened up from the trip. Cody brought in her luggage and steered her to the bathtub Trevor had filled, closing the door so she could have some privacy.

Really they needed to talk without her listening and didn't have much time. Their parents would be over soon and particulars they'd delayed discussing while Poppy was ill still needed to be hammered out. The older generation of Parabys was less than subtle about their desire for grandbabies in the house. When they'd headed back to San Antonio their parents asked all kinds of questions. They all knew they'd gotten away easy by sharing bare details, but they needed to have some real answers when their mother poked her head in.

"Listen up, boys. Poppy would rather not say anything about the babies yet," Michael announced.

He spent a lot of time with her after the shooting, especially after learning she was pregnant. He wasn't necessarily proud of himself, but he'd prodded a little when she'd been weak and tired. In the first few hours after she woke, he'd gotten the full scoop on why she was hesitant to make announcements. The reasons weren't happy ones, and they were important to her so they were important to him.

"Why?" Cody demanded.

"Yeah, that sucks. Mom's going to be pissed about the arm and crazy Japanese racer. I need granddaughters, one for the arm and one for the asshole with the gun," Trevor added, straightening the sheets they'd changed before they left for San Antonio. At the time, bringing her back had been a wish, a fond desire. Now that she was actually in their space, it had to be perfect.

"From what I understand, she miscarried six months ago and shouldn't have gotten pregnant again so soon. She should be fine, but there's always a chance she could miscarry again. The odds aren't high, but she isn't comfortable telling people yet." He held up his hand when they started raining questions on him. "She didn't give me many details, but there's a broken engagement in there along with a dash of 'her daddy's an asshole.'"

"Damn it," Cody said. "I knew something was wrong. It's like she wants to be excited about being pregnant, but she doesn't like talking about it either."

"Fuck," Trevor groaned. "I should have noticed that. Hell, do you think Mom knows I'm too old for a spanking?"

"I don't think you'll ever be too old, Trevor Paul," Mary Paraby declared from the door. "Where is she? You boys blockaded around her so I couldn't even get a look. Her name is Penny?"

"Poppy," Michael corrected, and hugged their mother. "She's been ill and wanted a bath before she met anyone."

"Yeah, Mom, Trevor got our woman shot," Cody said, kissing her powder-smooth cheek. "And broke his arm."

"Fucking tattletale," Trevor snarled, cuffing his brother's shoulder, hard.

"Trevor," Mary snapped, and lifted her cheek for a kiss. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom. The doctor said I'll heal with no problems. And Poppy's okay too. The bullet creased her arm a little. The thing making her sick is the bug she caught at the hospital. I had nothing to do with that. In fact we all agreed it was probably Cody who made her sick. He's been known to do that to perfectly nice women."

"Well, that sounds like a story for one of the long winter nights ahead," Mary decided, and Michael knew he wasn't alone in his relief. "I've got soup and bread bowls in our kitchen if you boys don't feel like cooking."

"We'll do dishes," Michael promised. He was willing to pay the usual price for the meals they mooched if it meant buying them a little more time with Poppy and guaranteeing they would all be with her when she met their family the first time.

"Are there any chocolate chip cookies?" Cody asked, and was frowned at by their mother. "What? I'm not begging for cookies, Mom. Poppy just likes chocolate and after the past few days... Hell, I'll make her some tonight."

"Quit cussing," Mary advised, and patted his cheek. "I'll take some out of Paul's stash in the freezer for your Poppy. Oh, and make sure she knows she can change her room however she wants. A girl needs her own space, remember that boys. Supper's ready whenever she is."

Michael closed the door and locked it. Their mother could still enter through any of their rooms, which connected with Poppy's, but he knew she wouldn't. Privacy mattered, at least it had since the last raid for dirty magazines and beer before Cody's eighteenth birthday. It was why the house was so big and the doors locked. All the doors, even, maybe especially, in the laundry rooms.

"Think Poppy needs help?" Michael asked, and his brothers' grins matched his as they headed for the bathroom.

Poppy opened the door before they could and stepped out, already dressed in jeans, a turtleneck and one of Trevor's plain, black sweatshirts. "It's like three cats stalking a canary."

"Pretty bird," Trevor said, with a big grin, fingers at the hem of the plundered shirt. "I know you like this because it's baggy, but I gotta' say I love seeing you in my clothes."

"Yeah, well, I was cold too," she answered, crossing her arms defensively over her belly. Michael looked to Cody and they backed away before defensive went further. "And too hungry to be in the mood for any of those grins, so just put them away for now."

"Hell, sweetheart, we'll feed you first," Cody promised. "Is there anything special you want? Mom has chicken soup over in her kitchen and invited us for dinner, or we could make something. Michael re-stocked on groceries before we left. They'll understand if you need some time to settle."

* * * *

“Supper with your parents is fine.” It was the only answer she could think of and after she said it she knew it was the right one. If she waited she’d be more nervous when the time to meet them finally came.

Truth be told, she was very curious to see what kind of people stayed in a plural marriage for decades and raised such incredible children. Steven’s parents were long dead when they began dating so she’d never dealt with meeting a boy’s or man’s parents. Before she could get more nervous she let Cody walk her out, Michael ahead, Trevor behind, sneaking touches as often as possible and defusing the seriousness she might have placed on the meeting.

The house was a beautiful wonder. With ceilings high in the middle giving way to an open second floor Cody explained held offices, playrooms and guestrooms, everything seemed open. There was also a basement that housed a bar, gym, and a third kitchen for Mary’s canning they would show her later.

The next area was a big, beautiful commons full of heavy leather furniture and a massive stone fireplace that reached the ceiling. Flanking it were windows letting in a constant flow of nature with no curtains or blinds to interfere. Next, was a formal dining room, two dozen chairs around the table, and extra ones around buffets. More closets and two bathrooms later, the floor plan duplicated to what she’d already seen, but the wood was warmer with framed pictures of wild life and family decorating the space.

Michael stopped at the closed door, the kitchen she assumed from the smells, and turned to face her with open arms. She laid her head on his chest, Cody still at her side, Trevor cuddling from behind.

It was the warmest, sweetest hug she’d ever experienced, soothing and comforting. They knew they were not only asking a hell of a lot from her, but also asking her to adjust to the relationship in front of their parents. On any given day that was a big request, but with the pregnancy, she was also full of hormones that made her oversensitive. The situation required more courage and openness than she thought she had to give, but she’d witnessed their willingness to help and was confident she didn’t have to do it alone. Their faith in her made her want to try to reach the potential they saw.

“They won’t expect us to stay long tonight, not after the flight and everything,” Michael assured her, kissing her brow. “We’ll eat, catch up a little, and then go relax before bed. Trevor’s an ass, but I’ve heard he gives good massages.”

“I’ll massage that for you too.” He rubbed her bottom with both of his big hands as he made the promise. “You have an excellent ass, babe. It fills my hands nice and firm but with the softest flesh. It makes me want to do all sorts of naughty things you’re going to love.”

“Okay.” The promise of Trevor’s hands skin on skin made her want to forgo dinner, but she shook them off and ran her fingers through her hair to straighten the mess Cody’s hands had made. “No more mauling. I’d like to meet your parents while I can still manage a coherent thought.”

Michael chuckled and fixed a stray curl, kissing her mouth, Cody and Trevor following suit.

"Boys, quit dragging your feet, supper's ready," a woman from beyond the door called, assuring them the kitchen occupants knew they were there and probably knew what they were doing.

Cody took his place at her side, and they entered the kitchen. She recognized the moral support in the way he held tight to her hand and she squeezed him back.

The kitchen was large, bright, very warm in temperature and welcoming. A huge island with a dozen stools around it waited with settings ready for the family to take their places. Obviously new, the appliances were shiny, with a huge double oven and stainless steel refrigerator surrounded by beautiful, dark gray granite countertops. The sinks were deep with fussy handles and faucets like the ones Poppy had lusted after during her housing search. The scents of garlic, chicken, vegetables and fresh bread weighed heavily in the air, completing the room.

It should have been a perfect scene. Grandma's kitchen or something like that, but her skin was crawling in discomfort. The heat made her sweat and the smell made her nauseous, reminding her of six months earlier. She'd baked bread that day to keep her mind off the baby she'd lost and stay occupied until she spoke with Steven. He'd offered, very reasonably over tea and bread, to marry her when a healthy baby was born. She'd refused the offer and he'd finished eating before leaving, returning to his ex-wife with a full stomach. After Steven left, her father berated her for hours, but in the end took the bread he'd asked her to wrap up for him.

"Poppy?" She jerked at the sound of Cody's question. The concerned looks the men and their family gave her told her he'd probably asked more than once. "Are you okay, honey?"

"Sorry, tired I guess." She plastered on a smile to banish the crappy memories she didn't want popping up now or ever. "Something smells wonderful."

"Poppy, this is our mom, Mary," Michael said, pulling a high stool out for her. "And our dads, Paul, Thomas, and Duane. This is Poppy Maguire."

The resemblance was startling. Mary was about five and a half feet tall, taller than Poppy, and very thin, sickly thin, with perfectly styled hair that attested to the cancer recovery Michael told her about. She had dimples like the boys, and Trevor's dark hair came from her as well. Her smile was genuine, welcoming, and made Poppy hope she wasn't a disappointment to the older woman.

The next three, the fathers, were much like their sons. Paul and Thomas were twins, both with wavy blond hair and nice blue eyes. There were plenty of lines and wrinkles but she couldn't deny that they were fit, handsome older men.

For the most part the boys resembled the twins, she thought. Duane, the doctor, looked older and had more height than any of the others, boys included, with a sparse ring of white hair on his head. He was very thin, almost gaunt, which reminded her of Trevor, but his hand was steady, firm and warm in hers as introductions were made. She offered to help and tried to hide her relief when she was waved to a stool.

Polite conversation wasn't hard. As a nurse she had to talk to people, so she knew how to listen and add situational appropriate dialog. Without Cody, Michael and Trevor, sitting in the kitchen would be torture, but with them beside her, they dulled the instant reaction her body wanted to run from.

The soup was good, the bread warm and chewy, company charming, but she hadn't lied about being tired. She tried to stay polite and interested because she was, but she needed her pain medication. She jerked when Cody's arm settled over her shoulders, startling her from her thoughts and jarring her bandage.

"She's dead on her feet." The concern in Mary's tone made her force a smile. She didn't want to be pitiful on her first night at the ranch, but it looked unavoidable. "Poor thing. I don't care for traveling, either. We always add a few days to any trip so we can catch up on sleep. You go lie down, sweetie, we've got lots of time to get to know one another."

"It's been a long few days," Michael said, a picture of efficiency as he quickly helped clear the island with Trevor. "Poppy, Cody will take you to your room so you can relax."

"No, I'll help clean up." Manners demanded that she make the offer. She could at least clear her place. She stood, maybe too fast.

"Oh, Cody. Catch her!"

Chapter 8

“I’ve got her,” Cody said calmly, cradling the unconscious Poppy in his arms. “I’ll go lay her down.”

“Dad—”

“I’m right behind you, son.” Duane was running for his bag before Trevor finished asking.

Cody knew Michael and Trevor wanted to follow, but their mother kept them in the kitchen and out of Duane’s way. Their remaining parents would try to keep them busy, but they’d be over soon. Their woman passed out, they couldn’t help, and no amount of small talk would distract either of them, though their mother would try.

“How many weeks?” Duane asked and pulled out the stethoscope from the heavy duty toolbox he used for medical emergencies.

“Weeks what?” Cody kept his tone carefully blank, mindful of her request as he watched helplessly.

“Son, I’ve been a doctor for thirty years, most of those years in a small town. I recognize a pregnant woman when I see one,” Duane replied, deftly checking her breathing and pulse.

“Okay, twenty-one weeks I think. I didn’t really understand the math when she tried to explain it, but she said she’d be twenty-two on Tuesday. I thought it would be more like sixteen.” He knew he shouldn’t have tried to fool his father. It hadn’t worked when he scratched his car at seventeen either. “She caught a bad stomach bug in the hospital and she has two stitches where the bullet grazed her right shoulder, but her doctor said the wound looked good. She’s on antibiotics, some light pain killers and nausea medication as needed. It’s been needed a lot the last few days.”

“Yeah, it’s probably just the baby and recovering after being sick. We count the time from the last period to determine gestation in weeks, son, that’s why it’s different.” Cody had never been more grateful for his father as he continued to explain and examine Poppy. “It’s the same way with cows, though I’m sure your mother wouldn’t appreciate the comparison so let’s leave that between us. Everything sounds good. Ah, she’s coming around. Poppy, are you with us, sweetheart?”

* * * *

“Gonna puke,” she announced, before opening her eyes.

Cody grabbed one of the bowls she’d seen Michael strategically place in both nightstands before they went for dinner. Duane returned after the foul fireworks with water, her pills, and the most wonderfully cool washcloth she’d ever felt.

“Cody, go help your brothers in the kitchen,” Duane said, as he efficiently pumped a blood pressure cuff, something she’d done hundreds of times to other people but hated having done to her.

He looked to her with indecision and she gave him a weak smile and nodded.

“Dad, can you show her the intercom when you’re done?”

“Sure, son, now move it.” After the door shut, Cody behind it, Duane turned his attention back to her. “Well, first things first, congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Second thing, is this one of my boys’ or a previous relationship?” Duane asked, not judging like she would expect a father to be, just curious.

“There are twin girls courtesy of a Paraby.” Too exhausted to worry about what he would think of her she lay back and waited for his response.

To her surprise, the grin he wore could have lit the country and for a moment he lost his doctor’s demeanor and hugged her tight. “I tried for years to talk Mary into one more baby,” he explained. “I always wanted a little girl, but she was sure we were all throwing boy swimmers and six Paraby men were enough for her. Baby girl, you just punched your ticket in this family. You could cut off all of our right arms and still be golden.”

Poppy laughed, but she knew she had to tell him everything before he started building doll houses. “I had a miscarriage six months ago. It was my first pregnancy, and it was spontaneous at almost eleven weeks. My doctor says I’m healthy and progressing well, but it’s still on my mind.”

Duane nodded, quickly setting aside his grandfatherly enthusiasm in favor of being the doctor. “Of course it is. If it happens once, it feels like it could happen again, especially if you were fine one day and aborting the next. I’m sorry for your loss and wish I could do more to reassure you. I can say since you’ve made it to this point you’ve passed the more risky months.”

She nodded, but even though she’d heard the words and read them in every pregnancy book she had, the doubts remained. Until she was holding the babies in her arms she didn’t think she’d believe it would happen.

“Pregnant with twins I’m going to want you to see someone every two weeks. It’ll be good for keeping progress monitored and good for you. Hopefully the reassurances will help ease some of the fear. I’d be happy to take care of you, or there are half a dozen other doctors that I would recommend in Morris.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

He deftly felt her stomach through the sheet and her clothes in a gentle, practical manner even her well researched OB back home didn’t have.

“Of course not. You’re my boys’ woman. I want you healthy and happy,” Duane said, and covered her with another blanket. “On that same strain, I’m sure your doctor told you you’ll need to be careful with sex. Use common sense and if anything hurts or you bleed, let me or whoever your doctor is know immediately. Only do what you are comfortable with, and if you do start having signs of early labor it’ll be cut altogether. I’m sure the boys won’t be my biggest fans, but that’s the way it’s got to be for healthy babies. Want me to check the arm? You’re an ER nurse, probably a damn fine one even if you don’t love it, so I’ll trust your judgment.”

“Okay, I’ll remind the boys about the...ah...sex stuff, and my arm is fine,” she assured him and turned her head, really looking at him. “You don’t miss much, do you?”

Duane chuckled as he repacked his bag, the top of his bald head shiny in the bedroom light. “Not where my family is concerned, and since my boys brought you home, you’re part of it. Let me know what you want to do for a doctor after you’ve thought it out. You can talk to the boys. They know all the doctors in town and might have an opinion.”

Poppy nodded and knew she should get up, it was barely seven o’clock. She was supposed to use the intercom to call Cody but it was all the way across the room and her bed was warm and sucking her in. Her babies were fine, her arm was fine and for the first time in three days she didn’t feel the imminent threat of having to vomit. She really should use the intercom, she told herself again, but fell asleep instead.

Chapter 9

“Is she okay?” Mary asked Duane. “Baby okay?”

Each of the boys swore, a habit Mary long stopped wasting breath to correct. Not often anyway. Like so many things, her responses were more automatic than conscious when it came to her sons and their dirty mouths.

“Oh, come on, boys. I was born at night, but not last night.” Waving her dish towel when they started to deny and groan, she couldn’t stop her chuckle. “When do I get to be a grandma? It would be an excellent Christmas gift.”

“You know I can’t say,” Duane said, and kissed her pouting lips. “But the daddy sure can.”

“Oh, and who’s that?” Mary asked, her eyebrows raised high toward her sons.

“Me.”

“Fuck you. It’s me,” Trevor replied. He elbowed Michael the way he had since they were little.

“You’re both wrong. It’s me, Mom,” Cody said, and all three brothers looked at each other and grinned.

“Just like your dads.” Unable to contain her excitement, she hugged each of them. “She’s very pretty and nice, but I wouldn’t have expected less. So? Due date?”

“April,” Trevor answered, albeit hesitantly.

“Don’t make a big deal yet, Mom,” Cody added.

“I’ve been waiting for grandbabies since Michael turned twenty-one, I can fuss all I want,” she informed them smartly.

“Poppy’s worried about miscarrying,” Michael explained, and she hated seeing him look so uncomfortable and sad. “She lost a baby earlier this year, and it was really hard on her physically. She shouldn’t have gotten pregnant again so soon.”

“The poor thing.” She shook her finger at her rarely irresponsible sons. “I know we taught you to be more careful. But everything will be fine. We’ll make sure she gets lots of rest and good food and gentle walks. Thomas, honey, you can reduce the heat in the hot tubs so she can soak when she’s sore. And we’ll have to shop, in a few months of course. Trevor, maybe you could talk to your friends in LA and find out what’s the best brands these days for maternity and baby clothes.

“Duane, don’t forget to tell the boys to be extra careful with her. There are parts of a pregnant woman’s body that need extra consideration and parts to be left alone completely. She’ll tell you, I’m sure.” Her excitement swelled and she didn’t care about the looks the men around her gave. “Oh, I’ll have to look online for new yarn. I’ll have to get started now if I’m going to have time to get a few blankets knitted. I saw the cutest pattern the other day, I should go find it.”

"Calm down, woman." Thomas laughed, lifting her in a big hug. "The girl just got here, for Pete's sake. Let her get used to the new situation and all of us, before you go too wild. They've still got a lot of getting to know one another to do, right, boys?"

"Yep," Cody said and had the decency to look away with a light blush, her youngest the most modest of the bunch.

"Yep, probably won't see us for days." Far from shy, even in front of his mother, Trevor grinned. The brat had the nerve to wink.

"You are awful, Trevor Paul." She swatted her middle son because he needed it and like he'd mentioned earlier, he was probably too big for her to spank. "Make sure Poppy knows she can come to me about anything. Lord knows, I could have used a feminine sounding board when I found myself the target of two brothers and their cousin. Oh, and make sure you cook her meals in the next few days. I swear, in early days we'd go for weeks without anyone cooking, and she needs protein. You all need to eat."

Six men groaned, and Mary felt her cheeks burn when she realized exactly the way her words were taken. "I mean food, you horrible creatures! You're beasts, all of you. I'm going to look for that pattern, take a bath and leave you to your dirty minds."

Thomas, Duane and Paul all perked up at the announcement, the trio of looks sent her way sending the boys packing. She loved her sons, she really did. They were the lights of her life and only kept adding to her joy as years went by, but there were things a mother couldn't teach her sons. They were tackling a lot in a short time and asking a lot of Poppy. Though it was hard to take an observer's standpoint, Mary knew they had to do it on their own.

Well, mostly on their own, a little help never hurt, she thought as she led her men to her bedroom.

Chapter 10

Never a fan of technology, Poppy frowned at her cellphone. It hadn't rung more than four times in the two weeks she'd been at the ranch, so she let the battery die. The boys were busy working, Mary and the dads the same, and since she'd been feeling pretty crummy earlier, she hadn't accompanied any of them.

So far she'd managed to stay busy during the times she wasn't sick or sleeping. There was a real element of learning happening whenever she accompanied one of her men, and every time she felt like she'd put in a full day of work. She felt like she was finally getting the kind of education she desired.

The first week was spent mostly with Michael during the days. He did most of his research at his home office but also kept a space in town. During the rides to town, nature provided its own lessons in change, but Poppy found her curiosity knew no bounds, something Michael put to good use at his office.

Morris didn't employ a full time detective so when a case arose that needed more expertise, they hired Michael. He refused to join the force despite their offers. Spending three weeks in intensive care after a drugged out teenager shot him in the chest made the "serve and protect" dream he'd always entertained lose its luster.

The scars on his chest weren't bad, but when he'd described the incident to her over doughnuts one quiet afternoon, she realized how close she'd come to losing him before she'd even known he was alive. It was a scary possibility that wasn't lost on him, and he no longer put himself in situations guaranteed to be dangerous.

Like Cody, he enjoyed his job and did well. He liked being his own boss, and as far as she was concerned happiness mattered more than paychecks as long as the bills were paid. Watching him work was interesting, but it got better when he pulled her on his lap and showed her what he did. She helped sort his files after a short tutorial, even helped him with a few basic background checks.

Nothing compared to it, and she found she loved doing the searches and putting together puzzles he set before her. He thought it suited her too, and was checking into some private investigator classes he thought she might like.

Cleaning his business office also helped pass the time when he was busy on phone calls. It was nothing gross, just a little messy and dusty, a lot like the way she saw Michael. He didn't notice the wrinkles like Cody did but couldn't completely ignore them as Trevor seemed to do with no problem.

After a few days with Michael she moved on to help Cody and Paul with the ranch. Over a dozen men worked for them, especially in their busy season, and she'd met everyone. They were curious but polite and happy to help Cody show her around. The calves were over six months old so they weren't as cute as she pictured baby cows, but she'd enjoyed feeding them their grain and scratching their ears.

Cody promised her baby calves and lambs in the spring, though Paul shook his head as his youngest ordered half a dozen bred ewes from one of the smaller farms in the area. He'd confessed to doing the same for Mary, years ago when she'd been new to ranching. Sheep in small numbers weren't so bad, he told her, and women and kids had soft spots for the little fur balls. She suspected the big man did too.

Trevor's work was entirely different from his brothers. He split his time between LA and Morris, promising the LA time was being cut to bare essentials since she was in their lives. The first time she stepped into his home office, she'd stepped right back out. Trevor forbade her from cleaning or moving anything in the giant cesspit, claiming he would clean after the game was released. It was part of his creative process, continuity he called it.

She figured that meant the dirty napkins, clothes, soda bottles, and Lord only knew what else, had been accumulating for seven months while he'd been programming. The fact wild animals hadn't started bedding down in the filth amazed her. She played a few of his games when she'd joined him for the day, but she couldn't stand his office so her tutorial into the world of gaming was cut short.

Waking up to nausea she couldn't fight outside the bathroom, she felt better by mid-morning and was biding her time until Michael returned. They were going for dinner and a movie in Missoula when he finished with a robbery meeting at the police station, but until then she didn't have much to do.

To occupy herself, she texted her sisters to let them know she wouldn't be home for Thanksgiving. Home. San Antonio didn't feel like home anymore, but she'd learned things could change from amazing to horrible at the drop of a hat, so she wasn't burning any bridges.

Her phone powered up in the kitchen, her kitchen, as she thought of the space, similar to Mary's, only in blue tones instead of brick red. Poppy loved the fully equipped room and enjoyed cooking, most often with Cody, who was actually a very good baker. Trevor and Michael weren't useless in the kitchen, but other than doing some chopping, she knew they preferred to eat.

A new text and voicemail waited when her phone powered on, both from her father. Her previously content stomach began turning. In the past weeks, she'd been able to put him and his reaction to her new situation out of her mind. The time away left her more in love with each brother and in return she felt loved, really loved and accepted for the first time in her life.

She didn't bring her family up often and usually dodged questions about them, because she didn't want any taint on her trip. Nothing seemed to last in her life, especially good things, so she was squeezing every drop of pleasure from her experiences with the Parabys in case something occurred to rip it all away.

"Poppy, Steven and his wife will be joining us for Thanksgiving. The menu is turkey and roast beef. They prefer sweet potatoes as a side, along with the usual ones you make. I'll expect you the night before. Sadie will air your room for you." As abruptly as the message started, it stopped.

He hung up. Nothing in regards to their last meeting, no question of her health after the miscarriage. He didn't even know about the shooting, because she refused to call any of her family and none of them had called since Steven's defection. Her father had been as curt as usual, definitely no affectionate terms. Paul, Thomas and Duane always called her sweet names, held her chair out, and did the things gentlemen who cared seemed to do naturally. The thought never crossed her father's mind to treat her with that kind of consideration.

Thomas noticed her struggling in the snow after filling the bird feeders one day and hurried out to help. Deciding the snow was too deep and she was too tired, he'd carried her back in the house despite her protest. Then the older man laughed off her thanks and made the best hot chocolate she'd ever had because he was worried she was cold.

Her father had steered her toward a career she hated out of preference. His mother had been a nurse, and in his mind it was the only respectable career for a woman. There'd never been a question what Poppy's career would be, and he'd never asked what she wanted. She would be shocked if it had even crossed his mind to ask.

The Parabys didn't assume to know her mind or know what was best for her. They asked, and then they listened. Her men, their parents, everyone in the house listened and she did it back. It was an experience she'd never had in her family. They didn't listen, because they didn't care.

Her father wanted, no expected her to cook and host dinner for her former fiancé and the woman he left her for. Not to mention the baby. The text repeated the call and didn't request a reply. Infuriated, she knew he didn't doubt she would arrive in time to cook and scrape after his guests, no matter who they were.

After texting her father about her plans for Thanksgiving not including a return to Texas, she turned off her phone and searched out Trevor. Her father's reply was sure to be unpleasant and she wasn't ready to face it, especially not alone. She needed comfort, someone to talk to, and Trevor, the only one home, fit the bill perfectly.

At the top of the stairs, even with the door shut, she could still hear the sounds of games from the landing. He preferred not to be bothered when he worked. His working temper was a running family joke, but she felt so upset she was ready to face a few growls if it meant he would listen.

She knew her father would disown her for defying him, and she needed to feel like she still belonged. She was so close to believing she'd found the family she'd always longed for.

"Trevor?" He didn't acknowledge her until she was right beside where he was stretched on the couch, laptop in front of him, keying furiously.

"Fucking robots," he swore, tapping harder. "What Poppy?"

"Um, do you have a minute?" she asked, talking to the side of his head.

"Do you have food?"

"No."

"Wanna fuck?"

"What? Um, I guess if you want." The churning in her stomach increased with every reply.

"No, you don't, you smell like you puked," he said absently, and continued to play his game.

Humiliated, she stepped away and picked through the filth as fast as she could. Two weeks. The beginning of the end already started. First, Trevor obviously didn't want her. Next, Michael would start seeing her flaws and unlovable traits she couldn't cover forever. Cody would probably be last. He'd tough it out, pretend he didn't mind her quirks and failings, but eventually they would ask her to leave and she'd be worse off than when she started.

Worse because the sweet taste of family and love would stay with her long after she was alone. Another failure in a line of many she was forced to claim. Sick to death of setting herself up for heartbreak, she swore at her stupidity. She knew better, damn it.

She deserved more from the people in her life than rudeness and orders. The woman she fought to become didn't have to settle for scraps and false promises. She was better than that. Refusing to let herself be lulled into another bad relationship, one that could leave her destroyed, she decided to leave while she could. Staying where she wasn't wanted was the old Poppy's way of life, not hers.

She strode away on a mission. It was better to move on now while she had time to make a new life before the babies arrived. Taking the stairs quickly, she grabbed her purse off the banister post. At the landing she cried out. There was no stopping the cramp when it hit, and she doubled over in pain against it. Tears burned her eyes.

She should have known. Bad things always happened in threes. Her father would disown her, Trevor didn't want her, and now she was going to lose her babies. Two magical weeks, beautiful weeks of reprieve, but they were over. She managed to get into her coat and to the garage. Trevor's truck was an automatic with the keys in the ignition, so she took it for the time being. He could have it back, but she had to escape.

The weather stayed dry lately so the driveway and road were clear, the sun brightly reflecting off the tidy snow banks. She'd practiced the drive in Michael's truck before and despite having to be careful on the turns, it wasn't a bad trip to town. Half a mile down the driveway, before the hairpins started, another cramp hit.

Icy gravel grabbed the SUV's tires and veered it into the ditch when she lost control. Her slow pace made a dent in the heavily packed snow bank as well as the car. The impact made her body jerk hard, and she cried out in pain. Too many things were happening. Panting helped stop the irrational screaming, but the cramps and tears were making it hard to think. Still stunned from the impact, she heard another truck approach not long after the airbag started to deflate.

"Trevor, you dumbass. How did you manage to wreck on a day like— Poppy?" She was too numb to respond as Cody gently began detangling her from the airbag and seatbelt. "Baby, are you all right?"

"Gotta' leave." The powder on her face stunk and made her skin itch. "Cramps just started. Hurts."

"Dad, call Duane." His quick pace increased at her words, jarring her though she knew he was trying to be careful. "Why were you alone? Trevor should still be home. Why wasn't he driving? He should have driven."

"Wasn't offering food or a fuck," she said, head spinning. The shock helped filter her thoughts enough to answer his questions. "I was going home when the cramps started."

"Home? Poppy, your home is with us. Trevor's an ass, and I'll beat him up after Dad looks you over. I promise," Cody swore, making dust fly around them when he patted her hair. "I love you, so much. Promise me you'll stay, you'll give us more time to convince you this is where you belong."

"Are the cramps regular or erratic?" Paul asked, his question calmly refocusing the conversation.

"Erratic," she gratefully answered, instead of answering Cody.

"Okay, Duane will meet us in the ER," Paul said. "Like old times, right, Poppy? You're used to hanging out in the ER. Good news though, we haven't had a shooting in ours. Duane even checked."

The pains stayed erratic for the car ride, much like Paul's conversation, she thought, between being terrified. He was trying to keep Cody from saying anything else or pushing her, she knew, and she appreciated his efforts. The ride was giving her time to think and reprioritize.

Her weakness at the house angered her, as it was the response of the old Poppy. She'd been giving up. With the men, she could have been okay with that eventually, but her babies were a different story. No matter what happened with their fathers she didn't want her babies to be gone. The selfish, self-indulgent crap had to stop. There were others to think about. Two little girls relied solely on her.

Cody's arms tightened around her, and she wondered what he was feeling. He continued petting her hair, and his other hand rested on her stomach. She couldn't make herself look at him, not when everything was bubbling inside her. The cramps, Trevor's words, and her own insecurities made his expression too important, and she was a coward. She refused to take the chance his face held quiet acceptance or relief.

The contractions eased back some by the time Paul pulled into the ER entrance, where she saw Duane already waiting with a wheelchair, his huge gray parka as identifying as a neon sign. She let the dads help her into the chair but wouldn't meet Cody's eyes. He tried to get face to face but Duane shooed him away and quickly wheeled her into the hospital.

"I'll call Michael and Trevor," she heard him call, but she was relieved when Duane ordered him to go to the waiting room instead of following to the exam room.

Hooked up to IVs and machines an hour later, she was miserable, but feeling somewhat better in the comfortable hospital bed. Cervix activity was being monitored but showed no dilation, and the babies weren't showing any signs of distress. The IV in her arm itched and burned even after the nurse put an ice pack over it, but she couldn't work up the desire to complain. She knew there was nothing else the nurse could do.

Duane continued to bar the brothers from her room. More and more she could hear them protest from the waiting area. Loudly. She knew the decision for visitors was usually the doctor and patient's call, and most doctors would have okayed the father's presence, but Duane hadn't asked. Instead he told her he wanted her to relax, something that wouldn't happen if the three "yahoos" as he called his sons came barging in.

The hospital was nice but she grew tired of spending time in the beds, no matter how nifty their remote controls. Between the days in San Antonio and now Morris, she had more time racked up hospital beds than her new one in her townhouse. Duane's hospital was up-to-date with all the latest equipment, thanks to private donations, but she didn't want to be a long-term guest. She would stay to keep her babies safe, but she wanted to go home, wherever that was.

"Those boys would be a handful to any woman, but add in some illness, fatigue, and Lord, hormones, and it's more than anyone could expect to handle," the nurse said as she looped a new bag on her IV stand. The older woman with *Susie* stitched on her scrub top had the love of nursing Poppy wished she possessed. It was one thing to be good at a job, but in *Susie's* every move, Poppy saw a woman who loved her work, and it was a comfort. "The Parabys are a wonderful family. Very loyal to the people they love."

Poppy nodded but wasn't sure about the love part. Even after Cody's harried confession on the way down the mountain, she couldn't forget Trevor's passive face not long before. The nurse was right about their qualities, just overestimated her place within their affection.

"Know how I know those young men love you?" The nurse turned her pillow to the dry, blessedly, cool side. "Each one of them hates this place and can't stand blood, needles, or illness. Duane was heartbroken when he realized none of them would follow in his footsteps. During Mary's mastectomy and chemo treatments they stayed a few minutes at a time, and we all know how much those boys adore their mama. They are near blows with Duane to see you. Paul and Thomas better get here quick or there'll be blood."

"They wouldn't—"

“Back the fuck off, Duane. I have to tell her I’m sorry!” Poppy nearly jumped out of the bed at Trevor’s shout. “I was a dick, and she got sick because of me. If something happens to her before I can tell her how sorry I am, I’m getting in my truck to drive off a fucking cliff.”

Poppy tried not to hyperventilate at his announcement. The idea of Trevor, any of them, doing something so drastic made her heart clench in desperation.

“Calm down,” the nurse commanded. “Let Duane handle this. Look at you, your heart rate skyrocketed and all my good nursing’s going to be for naught if you throw up. Pant it out, honey.”

A basin and towel were pushed on her lap while the nurse looked at a chart too thick to be the one they’d started at her appointment the week before.

“Well, bite my foot,” the nurse said. “Ulcers. Young lady, what was causing you ulcers at seventeen years old? Well, that explains it. I’ll talk to the doctor for confirmation, but ulcers and gas can make for real convincing pseudo-contractions.”

“What?” She blinked away the horrible images trapped in her head of the SUV going off the other side of the mountain, and groaned when the nurse’s words sank in. “Of course. Fucking ulcers.” She started at the uncharacteristic curse, shooting the nurse an apologetic look.

“It’s bound to happen eventually if you spend time with Trevor.” The nurse laughed as she checked vitals again. “That boy can curse a room blue in under a minute. It’s amazing how knowing what the problem is can help make a person feel better, isn’t it?”

Poppy nodded, though she felt ready to throw up or cry, maybe both, at any moment. “Could you let Trevor in for a minute?”

“Will it make you settle more?” Her smile was full of motherly comfort.

“Well, I can’t think of him driving off a cliff,” she replied, rubbing the goose bumps from her arms at the thought.

“Okay. I’ll get him on my way out. Buzz, if you need me before I get back. Ask for Susie,” she said, after one final check. “The other girls...well, just ask for Susie.”

She managed a laugh and knew she was under the best of care. Susie was a good nurse, and Poppy felt safe knowing she was looking after her and the babies. The ulcer made sense. She’d been craving milk products since her pregnancy. The same cravings had led to flair ups during college.

She’d been under immense family pressure in those years. Her grades were scrutinized and always found lacking. Every other Sunday before family brunch she would collapse into a crying, screaming panic attack until she’d finally seen a therapist. Therapy helped for a while, but when her father found out he was livid and refused to pay the medical co-pay. He suggested she talk with the religious studies professor at his college if she needed advice and counseling. She’d never gone.

Between the ulcers and panic attacks, she somehow managed to get through college without spending days at the hospital, and within weeks of finishing school and getting her own place, she’d been fine. The issues with Steven started after, which is probably why she hadn’t thought of the ulcers until the nurse mentioned it.

She'd had her stomach issues under control until she started chugging milk, eating cheese, sneaking ice cream, and all but soaking in stress and indecision. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. Susie had no reason to lie about her thoughts on the Paraby family, or their feelings for her. The cramps eased. She knew the added fluid was moving the lactase from her system, and in a few hours she'd be back to normal. Some of the desperate hopelessness she'd been bombarded with was easing, and she felt like she could breathe without shards of pain jabbing her heart.

The sound of footsteps followed the closing door. She opened her eyes briefly but closed them against the room's brightness before she saw who entered. The footsteps stopped abruptly and a muted curse filled the room, assuring her it was Trevor. Knowing it was him and not an aide or the nurse made her face the discomfort and open her eyes.

He looked like he'd aged ten years in the hours since she'd seen him. She couldn't mistake the regret and shame in his expression and found she didn't like seeing him so full of self-loathing, so she mustered up a smile. She'd been afraid of Cody's face in the truck on the way to the ER. Really, she'd been afraid she would see the same thing Trevor showed earlier—a complete lack of caring, which terrified her because she cared so much about all of them.

He hurt her feelings, and she couldn't forget that, but she could see remorse in the lines of his face. Turning away from him for making a mistake wasn't fair. He wasn't her father, none of them were, and they were offering her a home. It wasn't perfect, but no family was. They made mistakes, but she refused to be like her sisters and father. In her new family there would be forgiveness when it was asked for. Hormones made her a little crazy, but he deserved better than what she'd been shown in the past. They both did.

"Baby." His voice cracked like he was holding back tears.

"Hi, Trev. I'm okay," she promised.

He took a step forward only to stop himself short. "You're hurt." His cheeks were as pale as hers felt. "I hurt you at the house. I realized what I said five minutes later, and I ordered flowers. A lot of them because I was such a bastard, but you were already gone. I never want you to feel like you can't come to me with anything. You were leaving. Hell, I'll go before I want you to leave the ranch. If you need space from me, we can do that. I can do business in LA, and we'll try again when you feel better and I'm not so fucking stupid. I want you happy. Tell me what to do."

"Maybe I could have a glass of water?" Her mouth was dry from the medications she received and dust still clung from the airbags.

"That's it?" Trevor asked, and she saw some of his desperation easing. She didn't want him to hurt anymore. It didn't feel right to see him without his smile.

"It's a start, and maybe you could hold my hand?" She held her hand palm up. "What happened to your eye?"

He gave her a drink first and gently ran a warm towel over her face. "Cody reminded me of my manners. Do you need another blanket or anything?"

“For now, I just want you,” she replied as he made his way around the lines and monitors. He sat beside her, taking her free hand between his big ones. “I’m oversensitive, handsome, and not just in bed.”

That got a smile from him.

“I don’t like my feelings hurt, Trevor. My father thinks it’s okay to use me, and order me around like I’m an animal. A dumb animal. I let my family push me around and make me feel inferior. I don’t...that’s not what I want in my new family. I refuse to have that family again.”

“We aren’t like that, baby. I promise. I’m never doing that again. It was a joke in college, the food or fucking thing, but it’s stupid now. You mean everything to me. I love every part of you, and when Michael nails me in the other eye, I’ll deserve it.” With soft kisses to her palms, he reinforced his promises with simple touch. “I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.” Never once had her father said he loved her, let alone apologized for any of his slights. “And tell Michael I asked him not to hit you. One’s enough, but next time...”

Trevor laughed, like she needed him to. His conscience wouldn’t let him feel bad longer than he needed and she wouldn’t either.

Chapter 11

Plenty bruised, but not broken, Duane released Poppy the next afternoon after positively diagnosing three ulcers and starting treatment. Michael, Trevor and Cody tucked her in bed in a pair of silk pajamas she'd never seen but had Cody's preferences all over them. From the feminine pink color to the extreme softness that made her want to cuddle in and never take them off, she felt Baby Boy in every stitch. The flowers Trevor promised were beside her bed, a gorgeous bouquet of her favorite colors. She'd never seen blue roses but wasn't surprised Trevor found a way to get them in a bundle surrounded by dahlias, chrysanthemums, and mini white daisies.

Chocolates, a bottle of soda and a new flat screen had also found their way into her room. She wasn't a fan of TV in the bedroom, but Duane warned he would discharge her only if she agreed to rest so they'd added movie channels. To her delight, a stack of new releases, handpicked by Michael, whose bookshelf she usually raided, sat beside her nightstand. They left her to rest, surrounded by everything they thought she might need and promised to be within hearing distance if they'd forgotten anything.

When she woke, hours later, the sun was long gone and she wasn't surprised to see her boys stretched out around the room. She sat up, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and surveyed the evening-dimmed area. Trevor was asleep on the sofa, his long legs barely fitting between the cushioned ends. Cody slept on the armchair beside her fireplace, Michael on its match in the conversation area near her bookshelf.

They were good men and having them so protective and near made her feel more worthy and special than she could express. If she did try to explain, they would probably end up going overboard in their attempts to make her feel even better. The thought made her smile.

Spending time in the hospital was rough on them, she knew that from their time in San Antonio. They were such troopers. But before she could ponder it more and feel too sorry for them, her stomach growled fiercely. She tiptoed past all three, Michael letting out a snore as she left the room.

The ever-present scent of baking brought her to Mary's kitchen. Even though they hadn't shared a meal since the night she arrived, she didn't doubt her welcome. The scene that greeted her was one she dreamt of having. Paul was at the stove looking toward the sink where Thomas held Mary, hugging her as she washed strawberries. Duane was setting the table, eyes also on his wife, with a content, happy smile on his face. It was a normal evening, she thought, made extraordinary by the love that pulsed between them.

"Oh, hi, Poppy," Thomas greeted. She didn't miss the pat he gave his wife's bottom before he pulled away.

"No entourage?" Paul teased, moving the boiling pot of pasta to a strainer.

“They’re all taking a nap,” she answered, crossing her arms over her belly. “Last night was rough on them.”

“Hell, it should have been. But they’ll learn, honey. Give them some time.” Thomas pulled a chair out for her. “Sit, sit, you’re still pale.”

“Paul, leave some pasta without sauce,” Duane instructed, setting another place at the table. “Come on, little mama, you can eat supper with us old folks tonight.”

Mary insisted on something better than plain noodles, making steamed rice with a delicious ginger sauce in addition to the fresh fruit and vegetables on the table. The older woman took such pleasure in fussing that Poppy couldn’t help but enjoy herself as they visited and ate. The medications were doing their job, but the more bland food went down easier than anything spicy would have.

They talked and like their first meeting she was amazed at how normal they were. They liked to laugh and knew what was important in their lives. She respected that, because for too long there was nothing to laugh about in her world and her priorities had been skewed. The Parabys weren’t conventional, but they were happy.

Mary cried when Poppy mentioned the baby was actually two and the two were girls. Only hours after the ulcers were diagnosed she felt more comfortable acknowledging the life within her because she was more confident the babies would make it to full term. The men obviously already knew, but were thrilled and she enjoyed watching them watch their wife with such amusement and affection. Mary expressed her joy with abandon, and even Poppy laughed when she jumped up and down.

She had yet to see them look at their wife with less than adoration, even when she knew the older woman was driving them crazy. It must be hereditary because she couldn’t remember a time, barring the Trevor incident and she knew that was a fluke, when her men looked at her any differently. After dinner, she offered to help clean, but the men shooed her and Mary off with coffee and cider. They settled in the parents’ living room, a pretty room done in ore reds and mauves. Mary liked red and with her dark hair and eyes, she looked good in it.

“Well, Poppy, it’s just us girls.” As Mary pulled matching afghans from beneath the table, she grinned at her stomach. “Girls! Have I told you how thrilled I am that you’re here? It’s not just having another woman in the house, but having the right woman that is so nice. And not just the babies either, though I’m ecstatic about them. You make my boys happy, and I want to help however I can so you can be happy here as well.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.” Wrapped in a blanket, sipping cider she settled in, a new ease growing between her and Mary. “You have a gorgeous home.”

“It took years to get here. When I married Paul, we were in this same spot but in a line cabin complete with an open floor plan and outhouse. I helped him with the ranch while Thomas finished law school. Now their mother, she was a terror. She adored her boys, but always tried to fix Thomas up with other women.

"I know you don't know Thomas well, but he's got a problem saying 'no' and it was even worse with his mother. He finally set her straight, and to my everlasting torture, he told her why. She made my life hell until she died, oh almost twenty years ago, but she was a good grandma to Michael and Trevor. Not so much Cody, but I think that's because she was sure he was Duane's for some reason."

"I'd say Trevor would be Duane's," Poppy mused.

"Yeah, I've always thought so too. They have the same noses and build." Mary's overextended nod showed her discomfort, and Poppy wasn't sure what was changing to make her uncomfortable.

She watched as the older woman fidgeted a moment and the comfortable feeling she'd been enjoying ebbed more. She hadn't spoken much with her lovers' mother and though there was no tension between them Poppy was always ready for the turning point. If Mary didn't like her and told the boys, it would hurt the family. She hoped it never became an issue, because she liked their mother. Strength and humor followed her every move and Poppy thought she could learn from her.

"I know you're having health issues on top of everything here, so I want you to talk to me about anything you need," Mary said and held up her hand though Poppy made no move to interrupt. "You're an educated woman and I'm not, but I'm a good listener and I might have some advice you could use."

"You've raised three wonderful men, and are genuinely thoughtful and kind. I don't think education level matters when you have that." When Mary beamed she knew it was the right thing to say and opened up the questions she'd been dying to ask for weeks. "I do wonder though, how you ended up in a situation like this."

"With three men who adore me?"

Poppy nodded.

"Well, first off, I was raised in a plural marriage, three mamas and one father. They were an off branch of the Salt Lake Mormon community. It was a sheltered, wholesome life. Good schools, plenty to eat, a nice house. We went to church three days a week, and I figured I'd find a nice young man and start a family eventually. After I finished eighth grade, my father pulled me out of school and told me he was giving me to someone else who could finish my divine schooling.

"Turned out this magical teacher was his friend. I grew up with his kids and called him my uncle and his wives were my aunts. My mother didn't like the match either. We went wedding shopping, and Mama called her sister to come get me. Mama loved me, but I had little brothers at home she had to stay with. The life was what she chose, but she didn't want me pushed into it.

"Anyway, I ended up on my aunt Marcy's farm. I loved her very much, but she was more of a friend than a mother figure. She was an old maid and grew lots of vegetables for her roadside stand. I was happy to help her. That's how I met Thomas."

Mary's eyes lit with the memory. Poppy wondered how much she would learn about the complex couple. Already she understood better the building blocks that led to the acceptance of the strange relationship.

"He attended school in Denver. Found us by mistake one day when he was wandering in his truck and after that he stopped by every day. He bought the broccoli in August and stuck around until the last winter melon was sold. We'd spend hours just visiting. He told me about his life and asked about mine.

"I was nearly eighteen and I'd dated some, so I was no prude. It was the sixties after all, and even good girls had fun. We fogged up the windows in his truck all hours of the night when he wasn't studying," Mary said with a naughty smile.

She laughed, and Poppy could see exactly why young Thomas had fallen in love her. She sparkled in her love of life in a way not many women did. Taking pleasure in little things wasn't always easy, but Mary did and found the happiness Poppy wanted. She had guts; surviving cancer proved that, brazening through a challenging relationship and making it last lovingly took even more.

"There was a twin and a cousin Thomas always talked about. He missed those two, and his mother, but I did my best to comfort him." Again the expression on her face was slightly wicked. "I didn't see him much in the winter because of the weather and college, but we met up for movies now and then. We were having fun, but part of me knew it would end when he went home.

"He showed up with Paul beside him after we finished planting that spring. Marcy was in Denver with some girlfriends, so it was just me. Imagine my surprise when along came identically dressed, gorgeous men. They didn't talk and their expressions were exactly the same, exactly, and damned if I could tell who was who. When Thomas, I thought he was Thomas, kissed me, I kissed him back and I enjoyed it."

"It was Paul."

"It sure was. I was, as Trevor would say, 'freaked out' at the revelation. I responded instantly and even knowing he wasn't the man I cared about, didn't stop me from wanting to kiss him while I still wanted Thomas. It got so confusing. Like I said, I grew up in a plural marriage but had only seen the reversal, lots of wives. So two men was pretty out there, and brothers? I wasn't that kind of girl," Mary explained. "At first I thought it was a test, you know? I thought he would be angry because I wasn't able to distinguish between them. I was wrong."

Poppy's laughter joined with Mary's at the singsong admission.

"That first conversation was awkward. They spent the night trying to convince me to go to Montana and give a relationship a chance. Part of me wanted to go with them, even that first night, but I couldn't. I couldn't get my head around the concept, let alone practical practice, of being in love with brothers. I never understood how my mother tolerated sharing, and I couldn't see how it would work with Thomas and Paul either. I said no. Thomas went back to Montana to start law school, Paul headed back to the ranch, and I stayed where I was, heartbroken and confused."

"Obviously you guys figured it out." Poppy hated to interrupt but Mary took a long moment to collect her thoughts and the suspense was killing her.

"We did, we did. They were gone less than a week when the letters started. Three a week, one from each individually, then they'd write one together. I have to tell you, there is so much lost these days in email, texting and technology. A good letter can change a person's world. They promised me the world, and by the end of fall I decided I wanted it. I reread those letters a hundred times until the creases started to tear. After I helped Marcy with the crops, I used my share of the money to buy a bus ticket.

"Paul and I married in a civil service two days after I arrived. We knew it was going to work out and, sixties or not, an unmarried woman living with a man drew the kind of talk Thomas and Paul wouldn't tolerate. I was more used to gossips from the Mormon days but I wasn't about to say no to marriage. Thomas was there as a witness right next to me but we kept things very sedate and traditional. We've been together ever since," she said dreamily.

"Why did you marry Paul instead of Thomas?" Poppy had never imagined a relationship like the one she was in, let alone in the context of forty years earlier, so Mary's answers were illuminating.

"Because of the ranch," Mary explained. "And their mother. She didn't want Thomas getting married until after he finished school. He was the favorite and unfortunately they all knew it, so my marrying Paul made things easier for them."

"Ah, that's too bad." The thought of anyone slighting the men was a shame, because she knew how wonderful each was in their individual way.

"It was too bad," Mary agreed. "But don't you worry, I make sure I don't make that mistake. Both twins are treated different but equal, and I haven't had a complaint in years."

"And Duane?" It was impossible to hold back a laugh when Mary wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. For every painful memory, the older woman found incredible silver linings and they tickled her.

"Duane was different. He was in the army during some of its worst years. I didn't meet him until after he returned, but he wasn't the man Thomas and Paul described. The twins expected him to join the marriage if he and I suited, and that was fine. In nine months I'd come to love Thomas and Paul fiercely, and if they loved Duane...I was willing to try.

"He was quiet but normal enough I guess, though he stayed in a sleeping bag near the fire instead of the bed we shared. Sometimes he talked to himself, and he disappeared for hours without saying anything. I tried to draw him out but it was as if someone had turned off part of his brain." The memory infused her voice with sadness. "I don't know why but one night I woke and there he was, sitting at the kitchen table with one of my bread knives. He'd sawed his wrists into a bloody mess. I woke the twins, and we managed to tie him up. He is a doctor but back then he was still a soldier. He fought his cousins, men he loved, like they were enemies. We threw him in the truck, drove all night to the VA in Helena, and got him help."

“Post-traumatic stress?”

“Yes, although they called it something different then. So many coming home were broken. It was an ugly war to start with, then the chemicals were added and it was impossible to know what to expect from the vets. Six months felt like a long time, but they did some talk therapy and evened his moods with medication. So much violence and pain...it was scary. On his way back, I fell in love,” Mary said, the dreamy quality back in her voice.

“He fought the attraction even after treatment because he was afraid of relapse. Mental illness was still a dirty secret in the sixties and seventies. Stigmas were huge, but I wouldn’t let him pull away. Thomas and Paul promised me a third husband so I took him. There’s no denying love, and I told him that very thing. He reminds me when I find myself exasperated with them, wondering why I stay with the crazy birds. Love.”

“That’s pretty amazing.” Awed by a story with such strife and reward, determination swelled. Compared to war, societal stigma and distance, her problems didn’t seem as daunting.

“I like to think so.” Mary smiled. “And there’s so much more. I’ve got stories that would turn your pretty hair gray but call for something stronger than coffee. Since you’re pregnant and I’m lazy, we’ll move on. Ask me a question, anything.”

“What happened when other people found out about your relationships?” Kids weren’t the only ones who could be cruel, and Poppy wondered what the ramifications would be when one day she walked with Trevor and the next with Michael.

Mary laughed again, but it wasn’t a happy one. Time made it less bitter, she thought, but there was pain even if the older woman hoped to hide it.

She finally sighed and said, “Thomas told his mother, but she never did more than whisper Bible verses. The questions started after I got caught kissing Duane by a neighboring rancher. He told Paul. When he didn’t get angry like the man expected, the ass blabbed to the whole county we were dirty hippy swingers like on the coast.”

“That must have been hard.” Her heart hurt at the betrayal the family endured.

“It was,” Mary confessed. “Women I thought were friends stopped talking to me. Rumors about drugs and orgies flew. Holier-than-thou folks put me down whenever they got the chance, yet they were also the ones who stopped me in the parking lot and ask to join us.”

Poppy nodded. Having others assume they could take part in her private relationship was something she’d worried about. Trevor, Cody and Michael assured her it would never be an issue because they would make sure everyone knew they had a private arrangement. Mary’s situation hadn’t had that luxury, because at least at the start, there hadn’t been any sort of communication. “I can’t see your men taking that well.”

“They were angry, but the crazy thing was, their friends didn’t act any different. They still went to Thomas for legal advice. Mamas still took their kids to Dr. Duane, and Paul sold more hay that year than ever before. Curious people would ask all kinds of questions and even when my men refused to add to the gossip, they were still friendly.

"Women tried to lure all three away, because obviously, I was the evil temptress in the equation. It got so bad for a while I couldn't go to town without being assaulted, sometimes more than verbally." She took a shaky breath and gave a brave, reassuring smile Poppy didn't entirely believe. "They got over it. Margaret Jefferson ran out on her husband and came back a year later with a black baby. The woman with three husbands was old news."

"It amazes me how people want to police other's bedrooms." A thought she'd had more and more since her bedroom activity had become diverse. "Like I care what you or anyone else does behind closed doors."

"We couldn't stay behind those doors though, Poppy," she explained gently. "We had kids who attended school. Thomas and Duane have very visible jobs, so we had to find harmony with the situation. This community is a good one and it's full of decent, hardworking people but they're flawed, just like us. It's hard when something new comes along, especially with sex involved. Michael and Trevor were teased, and got in fights after kids repeated things their judgmental, gossipy parents had said."

Acid laced Mary's words. Sugarcoated, the truth was easier to swallow, but Poppy was thankful for the honesty, no matter how ugly. She needed to know what life for her kids was going to be like, and Mary was trying to help her understand by reliving some of her own hardest times.

"Not Cody?" Poppy asked, realizing the youngest brother had been spared the fights.

"By the time Cody started school, the older brothers and sisters warned their siblings not to mess with the Parabys." Pride and amusement replaced the tension. "By then a kid with three dads was an old hat. The more we got involved with the community, the more people saw we weren't drugged-up, orgy-crazed hippies. We were just parents, working ones like them. I made cupcakes for bake sales and kept my kids in line, just like they did. It's not perfect now, the community isn't, but it will be easier for you and the boys."

"I can handle it." Though her mind was full of possibilities and problems she hadn't even thought of before, she was reassured she could do what she had to.

"I believe you," Mary said. "And I'll be here. I'd have given my left thumb to have someone walk beside me in that grocery store when I realized people were talking. Just one friendly face, that's all I wanted. What I had waiting at home made up for it."

"Three friendly faces?" she asked with a smile.

"Exactly. Not only were they friendly, they were loving, and even when things got hard they never stopped being loving." Mary's soft and happy tone was a balm after sharing the ugliness. "Okay, ask me something else."

It took a moment for Poppy's mind to switch gears as it played scenarios of school life with her girls. She wanted them to be able to learn without fighting more than normal and Mary would have the advice she needed, but for the time being the heaviness could be put aside. "Okay, what would you say the best and worst things are about this kind of relationship?"

“Hmm, another good question, a hard one but...” She blew a breath, fluttering her bangs. “First. Three men love me. They say it every day. When I’m sick and ugly, they love me. When I forget deodorant or launch into menopause craziness, they love me. They have for almost four decades. The emotional benefits aside, I’d say I have the best sex life in the state.”

The unexpected candor made Poppy laugh.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve got it good, little lady, but my men have made a thorough study of pleasing me for thirty-seven years. There is nothing they won’t do and I’ll admit it, I’m spoiled rotten. One, two or three, any scenario and I’m a happy camper. Making love is always an event, not just a passing experience I barely remember the next day. I remember and remember and remember...”

She laughed again, and Mary nudged their shoulders together in camaraderie.

“That leads right to the worst,” she said, as the laughter ebbed. “I love three men with all my soul, and have for many years. What would I do without them? Without any single one of them? What would they do without me? One of us is going to die first eventually. Paul, this past summer...it was terrifying. They’re my life. In almost forty years, we’ve raised three wonderful children together. We’ve built something amazing I never dreamed could be ours when we started, and I love them. I’m not ready for anything to end, and I’m not sure I ever will be.”

“That’s very sweet.” She laughed when Mary smiled blandly. “Well, it is. Good sex is a given—”

“Says who? Paul and Thomas didn’t have a lot of practical application to their desires those first few months. There were planning meetings, question and answer sessions, and I’m pretty sure there were a few diagrams. There might have been a pie chart or two.”

“Michael, Trevor and Cody have their little powwows too,” she confided and couldn’t stop her giggles. “Then it’s like Cody’s the QB, calling plays and keeping everyone in line.” Her cheeks burned before she finished talking, even before Mary started laughing, realizing she’d divulged sexual details to her lovers’ mother.

“Hmm, Baby Boy’s the boss man. I would have thought Michael took point.”

Mary leaned over and patted her arm but she still wanted to crawl under the couch.

“Duane said the other night that it’s getting harder to give the boys advice about sex during pregnancy, because you’re becoming the daughter he always wanted. But I think between us girls we can be open and honest, don’t you? Quite frankly, there is nothing I haven’t done and if there is, I request details. Maybe we should start charts.”

With Mary’s candor she was able to laugh at herself, and the situation. The world was full of things to worry over, but Mary, with her honesty and humor offered sanctuary and understanding. She would always have at least three friendly faces to come home to, no matter how the rest of the world looked.

She'd never been part of a family that provided support beyond the most superficial way, and she longed for it. It wouldn't only be her men behind her, their family also showed support at every turn. For too long she'd felt alone. Even with her men, where the belonging and acceptance was starting to become real, she knew she held back. Wrapped up on Mary's sofa, she finally felt like she belonged.

Chapter 12

Pain in his neck woke Cody. He looked around to find himself in Poppy's room, surrounded by his brothers. It was late afternoon when they migrated to her side. He knew his brothers would keep an eye on her, just like they knew he would, but after the latest scare, none of them wanted her out of their sights. Stars had replaced the late afternoon sun when Cody looked out her window. She liked to keep her room as open as possible, enjoying every bit of nature the space allowed. He was glad it was something they could give her. Lately they weren't doing things right when it came to Poppy, and every little thing in their favor was important.

He stood and found the bed empty. The bathroom door was open with the light off and she was nowhere in sight. He figured since she'd slept through dinner, she might have gone for something to eat. Leaving his brothers to sleep, he headed for the kitchen. After spending most of the day and night in the hospital, he needed a shower. Paperwork was piling up, and payroll needed to be done before he went to bed. But since he'd taken an impromptu nap, he'd probably be up until dawn anyway.

"Hi, handsome."

Startled out of his mental planning, he found Poppy curled up on the living room sofa with a book. The lights were dim and a small pen light illuminated the baby textbook Duane sent home with them after her first appointment at the clinic.

"Paul lit the fire for me and showed me how to bank it before I go to bed."

"I'll bank it later, darlin'." A Ziploc of chocolate chip cookies lay open on the coffee table, so he sat and helped himself. His growling stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten since breakfast. "Is this dinner? I can make up some soup or hell, what did Duane say you should eat? Rice or something?"

"I ate with your parents an hour ago." Her feet were bare beneath the fuzzy blanket she cuddled in. Without the makeup she sometimes wore and her hair limp around her face, she looked as delicate as he thought she was. Trevor said she wouldn't break and she agreed, yet with her freckled cheeks a little pale and her eyes soft she looked fragile.

"Good. I'm sure they gave you the right stuff if Duane was there. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, Cody."

"I know, but Duane said—"

"Duane said I'm fine."

He bit back his reply. She was obviously still angry. It made sense. They'd all screwed up, and she'd been hurt. He and Michael both knew Trevor was an ass, but they'd let it go. He shouldn't have stopped with the black eye for his brother. The bastard deserved a full butt kicking. There was no reason for Poppy to consider staying with them if they didn't hold up their part of the deal. It was their job to protect her, even from themselves.

"I'm sorry I let you down, baby." She reached for her coco and guilt ate him when he saw the bruises left by the IVs. "I love you so much, I can't—"

"Baby Boy, do you remember what you said to me in the plane thirteen days ago?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You said you didn't love me yet. I think you'd better go back to thinking that way."

Aggravation and desperation mixed to make anger bubble at her words. "Don't tell me what I feel, Poppy. I'm a big boy, I know what you mean to me."

"It might be love. I won't say it's not because I don't really know what it's supposed to feel like, but I need you to hold off saying it for at least a while longer." She pulled out another cookie when his stomach growled loudly and offered it to him.

He took it hesitantly. "What do you mean, a while longer?"

"I mean it's been thirteen days. We had an amazing week months ago but that's not enough time. We've got a long way to go before the love stuff. Don't get me wrong, I adore you and your brothers. Trevor made me feel bad yesterday but that wasn't all him. I'm still learning to handle myself and the hormones—"

"You're fine, darlin'. Put the blame where it's supposed to be."

"I don't want to blame anyone." She was getting louder as her aggravation grew.

"So, you don't want any emotions?" He stopped himself. Anger wasn't what he wanted and not what she needed. "Look. I don't want to fight. You shouldn't get worked up about anything right now. We can talk again tomorrow."

She grabbed his arm when he tried to stand. He wished she wouldn't. He needed to walk away before he said something stupid. Trevor had done enough, and Michael would kick both of their asses when he had to talk Poppy into staying. Again.

"Cody. I need to slow down. I don't want to go backward or stop, but I'm not ready for you to love me." The tears in her eyes made him sit back down. "What if you do love me? What if I love you? Do I quit my job and move away from the only home I know? Do you really think I can do that after thirteen days? Even if I wanted to, it would be crazy."

"Love makes people do crazy things." He watched as she shook her head and wished he could change her mind, though he was beginning to understand they were expecting too much too fast.

"What you are offering is like...like eating too much chocolate. I love chocolate, but if I ate ten pounds I would probably vomit. I don't want that to happen with us."

"Love makes you vomit?"

"Love makes me nervous."

He relaxed at her admission. He could understand needing some time and having nerves.

"I've never had it, Cody. My family requires something for the love and affection they pass my way. What have I done to deserve this wonderful gift you're giving me? I'm still working on this crappy need I have to deserve your love. I'm trying and it's getting better, but please, be patient."

Her time with them had helped her gain weight, but he had no problem lifting her across the cushions to his lap. Relief flooded him. She didn't want to leave. They kept screwing up, but she continued to forgive. She was better than she thought at the love thing, but time was something they had.

"Well, I don't want you to throw up my good love."

She snorted against his neck and looped her arms around his shoulders in a loose hug. "I would hate to do that to your good love. Seems wasteful."

"Yeah," he agreed and kissed her gently, tasting cookies on her lips. "We've got time. Let me know when you want my words, darlin'."

"We've got babies coming, Cody. Two little girls who deserve a mommy and as many daddies as possible." She looked away. "Especially ones who love them. I want this to work so badly for them, and I want it for me too."

He nudged her jaw with his finger so she looked at him again. "As long as it takes, Poppy. We'll have hard times, they're unavoidable. You learn and grow and we're going to do the same. When you're ready, we'll be able to love you and the girls so much you'll never want to leave."

"I'm close. I can almost...but—"

"Don't rush yourself, woman." His barking command made her jump and eased the tension. "I don't want any love upchuck after we've had this heart to heart."

She laughed, grabbed him another cookie and snuggled into his chest. The fire glowed, the cookies were a perfect combination of chewy and crunchy, and the love of his life was resting in his arms. Cody was willing to put time in other hands, as long as he spent the rest of his nights feeling so right.

Chapter 13

Poppy gnawed her thumbnail as Mary navigated the heavy duty SUV down “Paraby Mountain.” Thanksgiving was around the corner, so she was helping Mary with the grocery shopping. She wasn’t just the mother-in-law figure, she was another woman. For the first time in either of their lives they experienced the support of someone who understood their situation. It was a feeling Poppy adored, and she loved being the one Mary felt comfortable enough with to gripe about her men.

With Michael, Cody and Trevor spoiling her unmercifully, she was feeling lazy. They seemed happy with whatever she did, but she wanted to do more. When she’d voiced her concern to Mary, the older woman enlisted her in Thanksgiving preparations. They’d all been waiting for her to get comfortable, Mary joked, before setting her to work.

She wanted to be useful; it made her feel less of a guest and more like family. It was great assisting Cody and Michael when they needed an extra hand, but she knew they could do their jobs without her. Mary handled the house and from her years keeping tabs on her father’s home, Poppy didn’t doubt the other woman could use help.

The family ate even bigger at the holidays so Mary’s litany of recipes and meal plans warded off silence the whole drive to town. Pies for this man, cakes for this one, Paul didn’t care for turkey, but Trevor and Duane fought for it every year so she ended up making both a turkey and ham. It amazed her how Mary kept it all straight.

No extended family joined them, because Duane’s father was in prison and Mary’s family refused to have contact after her defection. For years, her aunt Marcy had visited, but she died just after Cody’s graduation from high school. Limited family was something they shared. Poppy didn’t have much extended family, her parents were both only children so other than a few stray second and third cousins, there weren’t many hanging in the wings.

Her attention waned as her nerves increased with each passing mile. Mary’s stories of early days in Morris along with what she knew about the town played in her mind. The small, mountain community managed to be very self-reliant. They had a good hospital, the grocery was well stocked, and the town had its own creamery. She counted six churches when she flipped through the thin phone book, three bars, two restaurants, a pizza place and a gift store that sold everything from batteries to diamonds.

The town was also full of people. The same people who had once been cruel to Mary and still whispered about her relationship. Poppy wasn’t sure her skin was thick enough to handle comments. Her emotions were close to the surface, and she didn’t want to cry.

She so didn’t want to cry.

Trevor, Michael and Cody knew about the shopping trip, one Mary insisted would be fine. Poppy knew they didn't like her going without them, even if she was with their mother, but they didn't try to stop her. Michael gave her the sweetest kiss on her way out of the house and promised another when she got home. She wanted to go home now.

"What does your family do for the holidays, Poppy?"

She jerked out of her thoughts and almost wished them back when the question processed. The only reaction worse than strangers would be her family's when they found out what she was doing.

"Um, my sisters do Thanksgiving with all their in-laws, then we spend Christmas day with our dad."

"Sisters?"

"Four of them. Rose, Lavender, Lilly and Crissy. And a load of nieces and nephews."

"Flower names! Adorable. What about Crissy?"

"It's short for Chrysanthemum," Poppy explained. "They were born one right after the other, and my mother loved to garden."

"That's so nice. It's wonderful when siblings are so close in age. There's always a built in playmate right in the next room."

"My sisters are a lot older than me. Crissy was eleven when I was born. Rose almost twenty. I think the age difference made it hard for us to be close."

"That's so sad, and Trevor mentioned your mother died when you were small. I'm sorry."

"Breast cancer. She found it while she was pregnant but chose to continue the pregnancy instead of getting treatment. By the time I was born, the double mastectomy and chemo weren't enough."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Poppy. That must have been so hard for you and your sisters. And your poor father, new baby and no mama."

"I was a change of life accident. My sister Rose took care of me most of the time."

"No baby is an accident. Even when they aren't planned, they are absolutely perfect blessings," Mary said. "Well, you're lucky you had sisters to love you. I'm sure they're missing you for the holidays. You'll have to invite them out to the ranch sometime."

"No, they really don't." The words tripped out before she realized they were there. "They loved Mom, and I killed her. If not for me, she would have been fine. She found the cancer early."

"I can't believe they felt that way. Maybe at first. Children see things so black and white, but as time went on, how could they not love a little sister like you?"

"I don't know."

The silence returned. Mary wasn't right, and Poppy wished she'd been being dramatic. She couldn't lie though, not even for Mary. Her sisters didn't care much about her, and she couldn't miss what she'd never had. At least she hadn't until her men brought Mary into her life. She was learning what it felt like to have a mother. If her own mom had been like Mary, maybe she could understand her sisters' bitterness more.

The mountains beside the road drew her in again. They were beautiful and always different, even if she'd seen it a dozen times before. Between thoughts of her mom and of the apprehension still thrumming for the coming trip, the trees held the most simple solace. The cardinals, so bright and beautiful against the backdrop of snow and evergreens, stood out proudly. It was comforting to think the birds didn't care about things like family strife. Though for all she knew, the striking creatures had loads of emotional baggage and a soap opera long list of issues.

"It'll be fine, honey," Mary assured her briskly.

Somewhere during the cardinal daydreams they'd driven out of the woods and into the small town of Morris. Already parked in the grocery store parking lot, she looked around.

"It'll be nice to have a second person pushing another cart. Usually I have to start with one, then hand it off to the cashier and get a new one. It's a pain in the butt. Come on, Poppy. It's not like we're going in there to have an orgy in the produce section, so pack up that look of impending doom."

Poppy laughed at Mary's outrageous comment. The woman knew when to be crazy and blunt, but having raised three boys she couldn't imagine life not needing a little outrageousness more often than not.

Cozy against the cold in the down jacket Trevor ordered her first day on the ranch, she put away the doom and gloom and followed Mary into the store. The parking lot was cleared of snow and the sun was blinding, reflecting off piles of white and the customers' cars. It was a few degrees above freezing, colder earlier than usual Paul assured her. Normally it didn't get so snowy or cold until after Thanksgiving, but Poppy didn't think she would like Paul's "normal" weather either.

Inside was plenty warm, and nearly as bright as outside under florescent rods. Tidy rows greeted them with little islands of sale offerings at the ends. Mary removed her red parka and hung it on a hook at the front of the store beside half a dozen others. Poppy couldn't imagine doing the same in San Antonio but she followed suit, hanging her matching pink scarf, hat and mittens over the black leather of her coat.

Both tiny checkouts were occupied by workers in neat maroon smocks. They looked to be a married couple about the same age, which led credence to the "mom and pop" sign in front of the store. "Mom" didn't seem to be a happy woman and from the scowl that appeared on her face when she saw Mary, Poppy figured she was one of the more judgmental people in town.

"Hello, Gerty," Mary greeted, pulling out a metal cart and handing it to Poppy. "Hello, Sam. This is Poppy Maguire, she's staying with us through the holidays."

"Oh, yeah?" Sam, tall and thin like Duane, asked politely. "Friend or family?"

“Both,” Mary said breezily. “How are your turkeys this year? We’ll need two twenty pounders, maybe three.”

Poppy tried for a friendly smile when he turned to her. She looked pregnant in the sweater and jeans she wore and knew he was noticing and speculating.

“You breeding another generations of freaks, girl?” The harsh demand made Poppy falter. “Godless sinners, the whole bunch.”

Mary spun, the look in her eyes one Poppy hoped was never directed at her. “Put a muzzle on her, Sam, or I’ll take my business elsewhere.”

“Gerty, damn it, shut up,” Sam snapped, and turned back to them. “My sister isn’t right in the head, ma’am. She doesn’t think before she speaks. I’m very sorry if she offends you. You go on and get your shopping done. I’ll check the turkeys. I know I saw a couple twenty-five pounders in the freezer.”

She could all but feel the venom in the stare between Mary and Gerty. Neither woman backed down, but Poppy wasn’t surprised when it was Gerty who finally looked away. She wondered if there were other people in the store listening on, but if so, at least for the moment they were staying absent.

She followed Mary and began shopping, the other woman adding things to her cart and giving orders like the little general she was. After the insults, she thought their outing might be ruined but Mary wouldn’t let it. By the time they passed the bananas they were laughing and chatting like a crazy woman hadn’t accused them of being Godless sinners.

A dropped pacifier in the produce section led to a lengthy discussion about tomatoes with a little girl’s mother. Mary played envoy like a professional, easing Poppy into the conversation with the local woman. Before they moved on to the cereal aisle, she learned about the great children’s programs offered by the library. Tara, the woman with the tomatoes, was the children’s librarian and told Poppy about the story series and education opportunities they offered. She was a local, born and raised in Morris and graduated with Michael. When her daughter fussed, she gave Poppy a business card with her number and email.

“See, honey, I told you. Not everyone is horrible. Tara Binks—oh, she’d be Mueller now—is a sweetie, and she knows exactly what’s going on at our house. Michael used to do school reports on polyandry and stare down the other kids, daring them to say anything. He’s always been one to educate and facilitate understanding before kicking butt,” she said, pride obvious as she spoke of her eldest. “You’ll have to call her after the babies are born. There aren’t a whole lot of people your age around having babies, so I’m sure she’ll appreciate a play date. If you liked her, that is. Ignore me if I’m butting in.”

“No, it’s fine.” Mary’s meddling was something she’d been warned about, but in this instance she appreciated her guidance. “Tara did seem nice. I’ll call her.”

“Good. I don’t want to be one of those pushy mothers-in-law who don’t know when to shut up. Mine used to criticize my taste in dish towels. Can you imagine that?”

"Nope, and don't worry, I'm sure the guys won't let you get too out of control. I don't really know any better but they seem to."

"Those boys." Her laugh made her sound younger. "I'm surrounded by the eternal means to keep me focused and in balance. Oh, and who is this coming my way? Harper Angel."

She sounded like she found a hundred dollar bill, and when Poppy looked up from grabbing a box of cereal, she had to admit it was a fine discovery.

"Mary Paraby, you look well." The tall, darkly handsome Latino man set a box of granola in his cart before approaching. "Your treatments are done?"

"They are. You are looking at a cancer-free woman," she announced, with a huge smile Poppy couldn't help but mimic. "And the heat lamps you and Ayden put in are absolutely wonderful. Even though I'm feeling better, I love using them. Where is your handsome man today?"

"He is, ah, right here," Harper said as a slim, curly haired blond man sidled to him with two gallons of milk.

"Ah, pretty Mary Paraby." The new man's voice and grin were made for breaking hearts. "Looking much better, I see. How've you been?"

"As I was telling Harper, I feel much better," Mary said warmly. "Oh, and this is Poppy, my future daughter-in-law. Honey, these are the men who remodeled my bathroom last year. Ayden Clooney and Harper Angel. Ayden is from Dublin, isn't that just wonderful?"

"It's nice to meet you both." She gladly shook hands with the smiling men. "Mary's bathroom is beautiful."

"You'll have to tell whichever one you belong with you'd like an upgrade for Christmas." If she had to describe his accent, Ayden's was pure sex.

"Maybe." It was impossible not to smile at the handsome Irish man and his friend.

"And a granny too?" Ayden asked Mary. "I suppose you'll be after the other two to find wives and get cousin-making soon?"

"Yes, to the grandma part." Mary paused, and Poppy wasn't sure what she was going to say next. "But I don't think the boys have to worry about pressure from me."

"Another arrangement like you have with your men?" Poppy blushed hard at Harper's perceptiveness. "Don't worry, *corazon*. We happen to be the only gay men in Morris. No judging here."

"I see." That announcement had surely broken many female hearts in town. "And no judging here, either. I really don't care what you do in your bedroom."

"Amen to that." Ayden winked, his teasing reminding her of Trevor. "It's nobody's business but our own what happens behind closed doors and in back rows of movie theatres. Oh, and in cars, and parks after dark and—"

"You are outrageous, young man." Mary laughed and Poppy joined in as Harper shook his head at his lover's list. "See, Poppy dear, very few people are as rude as Gerty. Most are perfectly willing to ignore what isn't their business. Then, there's Ayden, our comic relief."

“And sadly, this relief has to get back to work.” Ayden sighed. “Mary, love, I’m glad to see you doing well. Poppy, it was a delight to meet you. I’m sure we’ll run into each other often in this tiny town.”

“That would be nice, just not in the parks after dark,” she said, shaking his work roughened hand again.

“Cute.” The warmth in Harper’s smile told her not everyone appreciated Ayden’s humor. “Welcome to Morris. Mary, take care of yourself, and let us know if you need more work done at the ranch.”

“Will do, you two have a happy Thanksgiving.” Along with Mary, Poppy watched the two men walk to the checkout counter.

They stood close but didn’t touch. That would be too much for the other shoppers and, though he was silly, Poppy didn’t think Ayden would actively be inappropriate in public. She could be wrong though, she thought when very casually Ayden’s hand slipped across the tight expanse of Harper’s butt.

“Those boys.” Mary chuckled. “They’ve been in town a few years. They do well with their construction company. There are two crews in town, Harper and Ayden, and the other is a very religious, conservative pair of brothers. We started with the brothers. Nice enough, but they kept trying to get me to leave with them to a women’s shelter. Finally, Paul fired them and Duane hired Ayden and Harper.”

“Women’s shelter?” She grabbed several boxes of Pop-Tarts while she waited for Mary’s reply.

“They thought I was being abused.” Adding two cartons of oatmeal, Mary shook her head. “To be fair, I’d just started chemo and I looked and felt horrible and they were trying to help. Any other time, I’d have explained things to them. Then if they’d continued to preach and prod I would have fired them, but I was too sick so I let the boys take care of it for me.”

“That’s what they’re there for,” she agreed.

“Yes, exactly. I don’t need them to fight my battles. I don’t need their money or stuff. I’m a grown woman and I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

“Sing it, sister.” Poppy laughed and applauded when Mary gave a little mock bow.

“Thank you. But I will say, this grown woman adores her men, and lives for their love. Love makes them fight my battles and take care of me. Just like my love makes me take extra time to buy half a dozen kinds of cereal. Love will have me canning jam in July while having a hot flash so my men will have what they like.”

Poppy laughed again and stretched her aching back against the cart as she looked up. “Mary, I want to be you when I grow up.”

She blushed at the compliment. “Aren’t you the sweetest thing? Now, enough, we’ve got four more aisles and a stop at the creamery too.”

Without more distractions they finished their shopping quickly. At the register Sam took ten percent from their bill for their trouble. Poppy was surprised when Mary, usually engaging and forgiving, stayed rigid toward the grocer who all but begged forgiveness. She explained she was just starting to give the grocery store another chance after Gerty, who was conspicuously absent at checkout, called Cody a dirty little bastard ten years earlier. Again Poppy was reminded Mary was not one to anger.

The creamery was as wonderful as promised. Quaint and friendly, she figured it would become her favorite place despite it displaying nearly every item she wasn't supposed to eat. The owner had their order packaged and the bill noted in the leather ledger on the counter when they arrived. SaraJean was one of Mary's favorite people, and Poppy understood why when she brought out a special "milkshake" she made with soy after she heard the newest Paraby couldn't drink milk but enjoyed ice cream.

Stress levels back in the manageable range, she joined Mary debating menu options during the drive home. She liked her sweet potatoes sweet. Mary liked hers savory so back and forth they argued and finally decided they needed a sweet potato cook-off. She was pretty sure they would tie. There was no way in hell her boys were going to side with their mother against her and Paul, Duane and Thomas were too smart to vote against their wife. Even if her delicious, banana-pecan sweet potatoes kicked Mary's chipotle butter yams off the table.

"Oh, good," Mary said as she backed into her garage with skill Poppy envied. "All the boys are here to carry the bags. I could use a cup of coffee and some of those cookies SaraJean made. How about you?"

"Sounds good to me."

Her three men peeked through the door connecting the garage and kitchen. It was the middle of the day and they should have been working, but they were waiting for her. She could see them in the rearview mirror, but from their drawn expressions she knew they couldn't see her. Side by side the similarities in the three faces were startling.

Their brow lines were similar and though their eyes were different colors they were the same shape. So handsome and all hers. She still didn't know how it happened or what she was going to do with it, but she loved them all. Three men for one woman, yet she understood now that love multiplied to meet the need of the heart and her heart grew every day.

Michael opened her door when Mary cut the engine, and unlike when she left, Poppy didn't have to force a smile when she looked up at him. "Hi, handsome." He lifted her from the high truck and even though she didn't need the help, she let him. "Did you miss me?"

"I did." The seriousness in his face said more than his words, and she knew he was trying not to pounce for answers.

“It was fine.” She kissed his mouth before he could ask any questions. “I met a few people, bought tons of groceries, and had an excellent soy milkshake at the creamery. The only excitement was when I played backup for Mary in a stare-down against some crabby woman at the grocery store. Not that your mom needed it though, she’s scary.”

“Damn right I am.” Mary laughed. “And if you don’t want that look pointed in your direction, Michael Thomas, you’d better help your brothers.”

“I will, Mom,” Michael said, but kept his hold around Poppy’s waist. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I promise. It was fun. I’ll tell you about it after the groceries are put away. Can you wait?”

“I can wait if you don’t need to talk right now.”

Her Michael was so sweetly strong and understanding that she threw herself in his arms again. He set her on her feet and joined the others toting the groceries. All three shooed her away when she tried to help, insisting she needed to go put her feet up. Mary did the same when she offered to help in the kitchen.

The running around was more than she was accustomed to and the stress leading to the event had taken its toll. She stretched out on Mary’s living room sofa, absently flipping through a women’s magazine full of recipes promised to wow Thanksgiving and Christmas crowds.

For anyone in almost any situation, a trip to the grocery store was mundane. Pedestrian or not, Poppy felt pride bubble because she did it and she took joy in the little things. The option to stay buried in their mountain home was one she’d considered. Mary admitted to wanting that on occasion, and really with a doctor in house and half a dozen others Poppy could make herself useful around the house and avoid going to town until the girls were ready for school. Maybe longer if she homeschooled. That option had crossed her mind in the first days when she’d cringed from embarrassment at the thought of what others might think.

Every day those feelings ebbed, and today might have been errands but she couldn’t help feel like she’d done more than buy milk. She’d stepped off the mountain and into the world, or at least a small piece of it. In a world that knew her intimate business, she’d managed to hold her head up. Maybe it was just groceries to most, but to Poppy, she’d taken a big step in the rest of her life.

Chapter 14

“I don’t think she needs to be riding the damn thing right now,” Poppy heard Michael tell Cody as she and Trevor approached the horse stalls. “I know Buttercup won’t throw her, but couldn’t all the rocking make her sick or I don’t know, puncture something?”

“You weren’t worried about that when I rode you half the night.” Feeling beautifully wicked she strode into the stable hall.

“Yeah, ya sneaky fucker,” Trevor said, and she laughed when he pushed Michael’s shoulder. “We were going to try to talk her out of being pissed as a team, remember? It would have been great Poppy, trust me.”

“I believe you.” At first she’d envied their teasing and camaraderie because she’d never had it, but they made her part of it now and she loved the new feelings.

“It’s been three days since she’s even looked at me, would you have said no?” Michael shoved his brother back and held out his arms for her. “Hi, beautiful. How are you feeling today?”

“Fine.” She happily rubbed noses with him and moved her hands under his sweater to steal his warmth. “Are my hands cold?”

“Yep, you should probably warm those up before you move any lower. So, are we all three out of the dog house, or are you still mad?”

She thought of the reason for their placement on her shit list. Three days earlier she’d had a doctor’s appointment. Due for full lab work and a pelvic exam in addition to her regular check up, she’d planned to follow all the websites’ advice and not be intimate the eve of her appointment. She’d turned down sex with Cody and Trevor because of the pelvic, but they’d talked her into trying other ways.

Learning the ins and outs of anal sex had been in turns uncomfortable and wicked, but she’d been intrigued enough to tough out the uncomfortable long enough for wicked to explode. On a late case, Michael missed the fun tutorial, but accompanied her to her appointment when the others had to work.

Their compromise on the position of penetration made sense at the time, or so they’d convinced her.

The next day in the waiting room, however, other natural functions occurred, and she was mortally embarrassed when what should have been an innocent enough bout of flatulence ended up soaking her pants. With the evidence of the night succumbing to gravity, she’d been desperately thinking of a way to escape, all the while mentally cursing the boys for not using condoms like she’d suggested from the start. That’s what she got for letting them sweet talk her into having their way. The nurse called her name before the old man who’d been in the little clinic’s only bathroom exited.

Of course the nurse was Susie and she didn't miss a damn thing. Immediately she noticed the uncomfortable way Poppy walked. The wet dot also didn't go unnoticed which led to all sorts of questions. Poppy nearly died when she confessed what happened to Duane who, bless his heart, had been relieved and professionally reassuring. Michael laughed his ass off both in the clinic and the whole way home. He'd been forbidden from her bedroom along with the other two for the past few days.

"That was horrible," she told them. "I know ya'll think it was hilarious, but as the one actually standing in your father's clinic, dripping and having to explain, I assure you it wasn't fun. Between the four of us, yeah I probably would've laughed, but there is nothing funny about me looking like I wet my pants in public, let alone having to explain why it looks that way to the man who shares his cornflakes with me."

"You're right, darlin'." After three days Cody finally looked contrite. "We're real sorry, and we'll be more careful in the future."

"Damn right, you will. I am not doing that kind of explaining ever again." She nodded in satisfaction and remembered the conversation she'd interrupted. "Apology accepted. Now, what's going on here?"

"Do you like to ride?" Trevor asked innocently, and then grinned. "Outside the bedroom I mean."

"Ha ha. Smartass. And yes, I do. We talked about it the other night, remember, Cody?" She moved her warmed hands lower down Michael's furry chest and stomach, making quick, quiet work of his button and zipper before slipping into his boxers.

"Oh, yeah. English and jumping, right?" Exiting the stall, Cody adjusted the cowboy hat he insisted wasn't adorable when she commented on it. "I could have you riding Western with no trouble since you know horses."

"I like them, don't get me wrong, but it's too cold for riding outside. Mary says my blood will thicken up over time, but for now I'd prefer to do my riding inside." She continued on Michael with long, hard strokes, the way she knew he liked it. Cody didn't immediately jump on the double entendre, which was disappointing, but Michael was keeping her busy.

She'd worried about hurting him until he took her in hand the night before and showed her exactly what he liked. The one-on-one time was happening more and more as the men were staying closer to home with winter weather setting in. Lots of hours were spent inside and while the nights were mainly together, several times in the past few weeks, the last three days excluded, she'd found herself happily entertaining Cody, Michael or Trevor.

She liked the change and enjoyed learning their likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses in bed and around it. The intimate business took her away from her investigation lessons with Michael, but he was a patient, flexible teacher and did his fair share of distracting.

"We've got an indoor arena the Four-H kids use at the other barn, if you'd like a little ride before you get bigger. Duane said it's fine for a while longer, but he doesn't recommend horse riding after six months. After eight he says all riding is out." Cody locked the stall. She thought he'd missed all the naughty connotations of the conversation, until he turned with a grin that got bigger when he saw the near bliss expression on one brother's face and eager anticipation on the other's. "Oh, hell yes. Trev, get her pants."

"We're on the same thought strain, Baby Boy." Already moving to cradle her butt to his hips, Trevor snaked his hands to the snap of her jeans. "Already undone, naughty girl."

"More like a chubby girl," she muttered. She didn't let the new touches divert her from stroking the long, thick cock in her hands, though they were pretty darn distracting.

"Tsk, ts. Michael, keep her mouth busy before I have to spank her," Cody said, and she helplessly moaned into Michael's devouring mouth. "Hmm, she liked that idea, didn't she, Middle Man?"

"If the flood on my fingers is any indicator, our sweet little Poppy wants some discipline. But right now I want her mouth on me. On your knees, sweetheart."

Cody laid a thick warming blanket on the cement floor beneath her and after stepping out of her jeans, she did as she was told, continuing her steady pace with her hand on Michael as she took Trevor's long cock in her mouth. He wasn't as thick as the others but was longer, much longer than her mouth could take, so she swallowed to take his full length. Their sexy practice sessions during lazy afternoons were paying off in her new skill.

He also liked to have his balls sucked and licked, and the masculine growls assured her she was doing it right. She loved the taste and feel of pleasuring each of them individually and together. The feminine power swelled in her each time the smells, touches and sounds made her drip.

Cool hands nudged her thighs apart and she shook with anticipation, eager to comply. Cody settled on his back, his tongue in line with the bottom of her sensitive clit. As the leader of the pack, so to speak, he was very gifted in following the every direction of her body. For all their talk and teasing, she knew at the heart of their relationship, her body was in charge.

Trevor came fast, his salty cum exploding deep in her mouth in a wave of curses from above. Michael pulled away from her hand as she desperately swallowed and tried to catch her breath.

Replacing Michael, Trevor joined her on the blanket a moment later and palmed her breasts while he plundered her mouth. With the pressure on her lips and breasts, the tender licks and friction from Cody's hard fingers brought her perilously close to climax.

Trevor eased her upper body down until she was on hands and knees. He settled beneath her perpendicular to continue kissing without interrupting Cody, but putting her in position to receive whatever Michael had to give. She wiggled her bottom to entice him to replace Cody's decidedly wonderful fingers with his thicker, longer, delicious cock.

"Michael." She pouted, begging when he continued to delay. "Please."

"Patience, sweetheart." Trevor's harsh whisper didn't help.

Where Michael could settle her with a few words, Trevor never ceased to light her on fire with the same. There was a husky quality to his voice, like a hard lick to her clit that managed to be a touch rough without being abrasive.

His voice described so much about his personality for her. Rough around the edges but gold on the inside. Gushy thoughts of Trevor fled when Michael finally slid between her waiting thighs. She was so wet, and she felt herself grab and suck him in inch by inch with greedy longing.

Cody shifted closer to Trevor but kept his middle finger on her clit as he kissed her belly and kept rhythm, while Michael's cock continued to work in and out. She felt herself coming hard in moments, all the way from her pelvis to her back, head to toes.

She fell to her elbows, Trevor catching her before her face hit and eased her down gently. The practiced, intense thrusts from behind never slowed and Michael came moments later. The warmth of his cum dripping and pulsing inside her made a delicious contrast to the cooler air around them.

He helped her to her back, the blanket a welcome buffer from the cold floor though she was nearly too far gone to notice the comfort. Cody took advantage of the new position, moving close so her hips cradled his while the other two men cuddled close to her sides. Stroking her thighs and arms, they kept her stationary so the thrusting didn't move her off the blanket.

She kissed them in turns as Cody brought her to orgasm once more. The lazy rhythm far from put her to sleep, but left her whimpering in pleasure and exhaustion.

"Easy, princess, easy." Michael pulled one of their flannel shirts around her shivering body when Cody moved aside, catching his breath. Even in good shape, sex winded him in a way she found adorable. "Trev, she's hyperventilating again. Sit her up. Cody, is there a bag?"

"I'm fine." She took an exaggerated breath and snuggled to Trevor's bare chest. "Just a little overwhelmed, but still breathing. It's warmer in here than I'd have thought."

"Horses." Cody took a long, leisurely lick of the top of her thigh and nearly got her attention focused to sex again, nearly. "You're so damn pretty, Poppy. We don't deserve a woman like you."

"I know," she said, letting him shuffle her jeans up her legs. "I spoil you boys but someone has to. I am tired, you three wore me out. I've got a dollar for whoever's willing to carry my big butt to a shower."

"I happen to adore this big butt, and I'll carry you." Unfortunately Trevor was already buttoning his jeans. She'd rather he stay naked so she could keep looking at him. Maybe for the next fifty years.

"Busted wing, Middle Man." Michael lifted her in his arms while Trevor scowled. "You can even keep your dollar, beautiful."

Stepping close before Michael could leave the barn, Cody sweetly rubbed her stomach. "I love seeing this little belly. Jeans too tight, huh? How about a shopping trip? Maybe we could get a few things for the girls too. We won't get anything too big but maybe a couple blankets or something would be okay."

"I always wanted teddy bears." The confession immediately brought to mind her childhood bedroom. No bears, no trains. There had been plenty of tea sets and pink, because they were all her sisters' hand-me-downs. "I mean dollies. Little girls like dollies."

"Baby Boy already has toy cows. He's got a hard-on for pure bred angus, even in the stuffed variety," Trevor announced. "So teddy bears should fit right in, cars and trains too. I like trains. Thomas and I saw the coolest set online the other night."

"Tomboys? Duane and I already have tea parties planned, assholes." Poppy was amazed when Michael kept steady pace and side kicked Trevor in the butt. "We can have boys next time. Sue me if ribbons and curls don't bother me, but I like teddy bears too, beautiful. We need to start getting stuff for you and the girls. They'll be here before we know it according to Mom. Have you ever been to the west coast, beautiful?"

"No, we didn't go on vacations. They're a waste of time and money."

Her sisters had described the vacations they took before her birth in vivid detail while shooting her dirty looks every spring when break came around and they stayed home. Their mother had loved to travel to national parks and museums. They hadn't gone to theme parks, but twice a year they'd gotten away as a family and had fun. Those trips stopped cold with Poppy's birth, and they made sure she knew.

She didn't know why her family was suddenly popping up in her head. Talking about the babies made her think of how screwed up they really were. She wished she could bring her babies into a better world with a huge assortment of extended family to love and adore them.

"You're in luck, sweetheart. I've got more money and time than I know what to do with." Trevor's comment was a welcome break from the path her thoughts were taking. "And I need you to be comfortable so my babies can grow."

"My babies, suck-head. I can buy you pants." With his announcement, Michael carried her out of the barn. Despite the creative insult he had for his brothers, Michael's words never failed to remind her they were her family and they loved her. "Soft ones, with lots of room to grow."

"Good, because I am hungry again." Yawning to fight back sentimental, hormone tears, she changed the subject. "Duane said I could try yogurt today."

"I'll get it," Cody promised, turning to the kitchen as Michael carried her toward her bedroom.

"My hero. Thanks, Baby Boy." Michael laid her on her bed, and she was content to leave her eyes closed while they leisurely undressed her. "Michael, what do they call you? Trev is Middle Man, Cody's Baby Boy, Michael is..."

"Ah, Big Guy." Embarrassment filled his voice, and when she opened her eyes it was matched with the pink in his cheeks. "Doesn't fit so much now."

"Only because the other two are freaks."

"Freaks with big cocks," Trevor added with a smirk for his brother.

“And a broken arm.” With the parting shot made, Michael carried her to the shower. She peeked over his shoulder and giggled at Trevor flipping him off but blowing her kisses at the same time.

Brotherly silliness aside, Poppy smiled when Michael’s naked body pressed against her.

“Big Guy,” she mused, soaping his chest. “I like it.”

“It doesn’t fit anymore,” he insisted, taking the washcloth from her and running it down her back so she pressed to his front.

“Sweetie, you are plenty big where it counts.”

“Not the biggest.” His cock was thick and long against her belly, but not as long as Trevor’s, or as thick as Cody’s.

“Always thinking of Little Michael, who, by the way, is much larger than average, as I’m sure you know.” She traced her fingers through the soap bubbles on his chest. “And I meant your heart, ya dummy. You’re an incredibly thoughtful and sweet man. Do you have any idea how special I feel when I talk with you, knowing you listen and value my opinions? Knowing you worry about me and you actually think about whether I’ve had enough to eat or if I’m warm enough at night is amazing.”

“Of course I do those things.” Gently, he separated their hug to wash her stomach and thighs. “Cody said you aren’t ready to hear it but I love you, Poppy. I always want you to feel warm and special. You do the same for me.”

“Why would you choose to do something like this, Michael?” The question had weighed on her mind for weeks, but the time never seemed right to ask.

“Like what, beautiful?” he asked absently, continuing his sensual cleaning.

“Like sharing a woman. Of the three brothers, it surprises me most you would want an arrangement like this. You seem like the kind of guy who’d be happy in the suburbs with a wife and kids. Do you know what I mean?”

“I suppose.” He braced her and lifted her right foot. “I was engaged about five years ago to a woman I thought I’d be happy with. Her name was Tiffany, and we met after a drug bust she helped my unit with. She was kind, sweet, funny, but even though I thought I loved her, I couldn’t make myself bring her here. I knew—knew—she wouldn’t be with Cody and Trevor. She wasn’t the kind of woman who could. Women like you, who can love more than one man with the ferocity and heart you are capable of, are a rare breed, and Tiffany wasn’t one.”

“We are gluttons for punishment.” She ran her fingers through his wet hair, touched by his description of her.

“Anyway, I probably would’ve been happy with her, probably would have had a couple kids, moved to the burbs like you said, and we would’ve had a good enough life. I’m a big boy. I’m perfectly capable of being content when I don’t get my way.

“Then this show came on one night about polyandry and polygamy, and yeah, I know it’s not for everyone, and I know some people abuse it by adding girls that are too young. I really do understand the hesitance some people feel about it, but when I learned how little she thought of the practice, even a loving version with consenting adults...that was it. I couldn’t live with someone who held my family in contempt. She never struck me as an unreasonable person, so she might have tried to understand.

“It wasn’t enough, not when it comes to my family. Maybe I was looking for an escape, but I broke the engagement. I told her I wasn’t ready to get married, I was sorry. I mean, I really cared for her and I know she loved me. Breaking up was painful for both of us, even if I was relieved. I was shot a few weeks later and came home, and five years later we found you.

“So yeah, I guess I can see what you mean about the ‘burb life,’ but I’m so damn thankful I didn’t settle for ‘all right.’ Knowing what the best is, and really knowing what it means to be happy, seconds would have paled in comparison.”

“I’m glad.” Water rolled down their faces, hiding her tears. “I am so glad.”

He kissed her, the moment so intense and sweet any ache from their earlier encounter in the barn was forgotten as he gently tucked her in the shower’s corner. Her height made the angle awkward but being together was too right to wait. He lifted her carefully, keeping his feet balanced, and she wiggled her shoulders to fit until her foot caught the edge of the tub and braced.

The head of his penis found the perfect angle and incredibly slowly he lowered her into place, inch by inch until she was impaled and his lips were pressed to her forehead. She couldn’t control her whimpers when he lifted her again, methodically moving her body up and down his length, almost totally out, then back down to complete connection.

There was no rush and she held him tight, along for the ride. With her body sensitive in pregnancy and already stimulated from the barn, she was coming before the second stroke. Michael’s lovemaking triggered small, pulsing orgasms, making new ones when she helplessly clenched his cock with every stroke.

His hands stayed gentle despite the slickness of her skin, yet she didn’t worry about him dropping her. Michael would never let her fall. No one was as steady as her man, and even in climax he maintained control because he had to keep her safe. She loved it when he lost his head in bed and loved pushing him beyond his masterful, easy going control. There was something equally as special when he maintained his restraint, as he had under the shower’s flow. He was a master of his domain, able to read any situation and make it the best possible.

She felt his release between her thighs and also in the easing of the shoulder muscles beneath her fingers. He shifted her to the ground, holding her tightly until her feet found the floor. He kept a hand on her waist as he grabbed the wash cloth again and hit his knees before her. Kissing her breasts, belly and thighs, before and after washing them with the soft cloth, he made his way across her body.

With each press of his lips exhaustion weighted until she sagged into his shoulder, her whole body completely satisfied from all the lovemaking. The water took some of the aches she was sure to feel, but the only thought in her brain was Michael.

* * * *

When Cody returned with a light lunch for Poppy and sandwiches for the rest, she was cuddled in bed with Michael, Trevor sitting beside them working on his laptop. It was happening like their dads said. One by one the connections were being made, and he'd be blind if he didn't see something special was growing between her and Michael. Cody, like Trevor, wished she loved him first, but with one down it meant her heart was ready for them all.

Soon enough it would be him cuddling with Poppy, hearing how much she loved him, and not just with her body. Keeping his words in while she grew accustomed to life with them and love was the hardest thing he'd ever done, but his day was coming. That would be the best day, Cody decided, the day she loved him like he loved her.

Trevor tapped her butt to get her attention and when she looked up it was with a smile for both of them, no annoyance at being interrupted from her time with Michael. She cared, and if the look on her face was honest, and they'd learned she couldn't lie worth a damn, she was happy. They weren't perfect, they made their mistakes, but they were doing something right.

Chapter 15

It was late, long after midnight, but not nearly close enough to morning for Poppy. She woke with a stomach ache, no doubt from eating too much. Michael brought half a dozen pizzas of all styles and varieties and she'd enjoyed abundantly. At the time it was delicious, but she was paying for the excess with uncomfortable babies turning and kicking.

Her boys were sleeping, Michael in her bed while the other two had found their way to their rooms. They had an informal rotation they kept if they didn't all stay, and tonight only Michael was sleeping with her. Cody or Trevor would have woken when she left to find some Tums. Michael needed three snooze alarms and a glass of water on the head sometimes.

She was never without someone it seemed, and she found herself liking the constant company. She sat and put her feet up on the sofa with her blanket and soda beside her. Scooting, she tried to find the sofa's sweet spot and relaxed when she was finally comfortable, her aching stomach and her men on her mind. Surrounded by the ones who loved her and their family was a good place to be. Putting Cody off about the love thing hadn't been easy, but the time put another layer of perspective on the relationship. Love was surrounding her.

She didn't recognize it because it was so normal and easy in the Paraby house, but once Michael explained his reasons for their relationship, she saw it all over. Love was present when Mary griped at her sons about stealing her bleach. It was there when the boys rolled their eyes in response, and Trevor ordered a flat of the stuff off eBay.

Affection and emotion like they had was not the same as in her family home.

The fireplace snapped like a log dropped. It was electric so that wasn't possible, but it brought to mind her father's house. There was a fireplace in his formal living room. They never used it and it was probably capped off, but it was there for everyone to see. Lying in the dark watching the fire flicker, she remembered having mono and staring at the lifeless fireplace. She'd barely been thirteen, miserable and horribly sick in the house by herself.

When her symptoms interfered with her breathing, her sister took her to the hospital. After three days alone, her sisters busy with their families, she'd been sent home to recover while her father worked.

He sent her back to school the moment the doctor said she was no longer infectious. She remembered being exhausted, ill and pitiful, but in her father's mind she should have been fine, so he'd treated her as such. She couldn't pretend ensuring basic medical attention was love.

Only hours before, Trevor carried her from the kitchen to her room because she'd yawned while getting a glass of water. He said he didn't want her getting too tired, because then she would get sick. Her eyes burned just thinking about the absolute sweetness in his expression when he'd toted her around. Whether or not Poppy believed what Cody said about love early on hadn't mattered as Trevor laid her in bed, because in that moment her doubts were eradicated.

Then, he'd tucked her in and asked if she wanted him to scare away the monsters.

He was being silly, of course. Thomas told her stories of the three boys and the terrifying monsters they imagined under their beds. Every night one or more dad had been enlisted to scare them away, toss them out, and on rare occasions, shoot the bastards.

No one had ever scared her monsters away. She'd always been read to, usually from one of her father's textbooks or whatever novel her sisters were reading, but no one ever checked the back of her neck to make sure she was warm enough. No one ever kissed her extra to guarantee sweet dreams. But Trevor, Michael, and Cody did those things for her.

"Fuck."

Poppy looked away from the fire to find Trevor holding the toe he'd stubbed. He had an ongoing battle with the couch and its tendency to jump out in front of his feet. He was losing. The house was warm and the floor was heated, so he only wore black boxer briefs. He preferred them over Michael's boxers and Cody's tighty-whities. Her men presented a wonderful array of differences, even in underwear preferences.

His attention finally turned her way, and she realized he hadn't expected to see her out of her room. She knew some nights he wandered, inspiration hitting at odd times. In his business the next big idea was the only important one, and though he seemed carefree, she knew he was under immense pressure to make his next game bigger and better.

"Hey, babe." He gingerly tested his abused toe. "Everything okay?"

"Tummy ache." Saluting him with her glass of Seven-Up, she pulled her blanket higher.

"I'll go wake up Dad."

She caught him before he hopped past. "Please don't. I ate too much, that's all. Why are you up, sweetie?"

"Zombies and strippers on the brain." He plopped down on the couch and grinned. "I was going to eat the rest of the pizza and try to sleep. Sometimes if I let things simmer all night, the ideas are boiling by morning."

"You're so smart and creative, Trevor." Moving to the side, Poppy gave him enough room to stretch out beside her, his slim frame fitting easily on the wide couch cushions. "I wish I could do stuff like you. Some of it really is art, you know."

"Naw, it's just video games. Millions of little pixels and pieces at my command." He tucked the blanket over both of them and settled back. "I like to think of myself as more of a general than an artist, maybe potentate even."

"You would." She laughed and nestled her head against his shoulder.

They lay quietly with the fake fire burning. There was also a real one, but lighting it was a pain and she didn't want to bother with it. The electric one was nice and very realistic. It made the noises and threw heat as well.

With her family she lived the electric fireplace half-life. It looked similar to the real thing, even sounded like the real thing on most occasions, but wasn't family. Knowing what family felt, looked, sounded, and even smelled like, she was glad she'd taken the chance of getting burned. She wasn't sure she would have agreed a few months ago, but now she knew the rewards outweighed the risks.

Trevor's hand settled on her stomach, which had grown much bigger during her month at the ranch. At Thanksgiving dinner, everyone added a little to her plate and told Duane to shut up when he advised against eating for three. They'd done the sappy talk about what they were thankful for after pumpkin pie was passed around. She'd never had anyone say they were thankful for her and she'd cried her eyes out as Cody, Michael and Trevor did just that. They were thankful for her, and for their healthy baby girls, growing safely inside her.

She was grateful, completely content with the turn her life was taking and for the people in it. Cody had cuddled her on his lap, fed her pie while the tears dried up, and kept her there until Michael lifted her to his own. Trevor settled her on his lap during a football game later. It was her best Thanksgiving ever.

Trevor's hand rubbing the twins, who continued to kick and turn just shy of enough to be felt by their dads, reminded her of that day. It was perfect in her mind and the memory, along with the soothing touch, was helping her relax. She should have wanted a little alone time, should have needed a night to herself, but she didn't. She wanted to cuddle with Trevor and fall asleep with him cooing to their babies.

"You're not out here thinking about leaving us again, are you?" he asked, breaking her out of her cuddly, happy thoughts. "Because you know how sorry I am for what I said, right?"

"What did you say?" Nothing horrible enough for an apology invaded her happy memory laced mind.

"Your second week here." Shame filled his voice. "What I said that made you leave."

"Oh, that." She wondered if what she'd forgiven and moved past had weighed on him all along. "Trevor, it's done. Remember what I told you about my dad? You hurt my feelings, but I know you aren't like him and until you prove you are, I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?" He sounded so young, his seductive voice uncertain, and she knew he hated that, she hated it too.

"Do I promise? Do I promise to stay with the three men who made me smile in San Antonio when I was a wreck? Do I promise to stay with the men who gave me two perfect babies and claim paternity when they could shrug me off? Do I promise not to leave the men who hold me every night and any time during the day when I need a hug or cry?"

"I get it."

"I don't think you do." She turned to him, her tummy a definite bump between them, and he nearly fell off the couch. Their giggles pulled the deep, heartfelt moment back into a more comfortable place. "Okay, quit laughing, you dork."

"Okay, babe, I'm done." He reached around and dug his fingers into the flesh of her butt.

She gave him a look, one she'd seen Mary give and was perfecting for her own men.

"What? I gotta' hold on somewhere."

"Okay, okay." She couldn't hold back the giggles. Trevor was crazy and had a way of pulling her into the craziness. A few minutes later, she took a deep breath and forced herself back into control. "As I was about to say, before you distracted me, I love this house, I love your family, and I love how I feel about myself when I'm here. There is nowhere else I want to be, Trev. Nowhere."

The fire reflected in his eyes took nothing away from the love she saw. So much between them was intense but this love felt soft, sweet and as comforting as her favorite socks. She pressed dry, innocent kisses to his lips and cheeks and couldn't stop smiling between each contact. He made no effort to deepen their kisses, content to let her set the pace, and tonight she just wanted to be close.

After twenty minutes kissing in front of the fire, the clock chimed three AM. "Ready for bed, babe? You can bunk with me tonight. I'm sure Mike's taken over your bed by now."

"Aren't you hungry?" He was right about getting to bed, but she didn't want to move. "I know you came out for a snack."

"Not so much anymore," he admitted. "I was more restless than hungry, but now I'm neither. You do that for me, Poppy. You're my Ritalin."

"I am not." She laughed. "And I'm not sure that metaphor is flattering."

"Yep, you are, and it's very flattering, babe. I didn't say you were a downer, I said you settle me. You center and focus me, which is not the easiest thing to do. Ask Mom about keeping me levelheaded and constructively occupied. I drove her batshit. She'd call one of the dads to come get me in the summers, because I was that much of a pain in the ass. Somehow you manage to be my Viagra and my Ritalin all in one." He rolled easily to his feet and offered his hands. "Tonight you've settled me down instead of winding me up, so how about I carry you to my room and we get some sleep? Unless you aren't feeling better?"

"I'm feeling much better." She looked at his offered palms and though bed with him sounded wonderful, it involved moving and that wasn't tempting. "It was just indigestion and a little heartburn. Bed sounds really good."

"Then come on up, baby girl." For such a slim, lithe man he had no trouble lifting her high to his chest. "We'll cuddle down because we're both tired, then we can wake up together, all refreshed, and you can be my Viagra again."

Chapter 16

Up and wandering at midnight, Poppy figured her afternoon naps had to end. Her mind wasn't overly burdened, and her stress was manageable. There wasn't a reason she shouldn't be in bed; she just wasn't tired. Usually, after a full day helping Michael and a few hours of crazy sex she was ready to sleep, but once in a while their lovemaking invigorated her and tonight was one of those. She left her boys sleeping, all three naked as jaybirds and spread eagle in her bed. The extra long, extra wide space was perfect because there was plenty of room for her to cuddle between two.

The fireplace was usually a welcome solace, but with the restlessness it held little appeal. Dinner had been spaghetti and meatballs with Mary and the dads. Too full for dessert at the time, she'd passed up chocolate chip cookies so she turned left at her own kitchen to seek out a snack. Directing lights glowed low near the floors, guiding to the other side of the house.

The fleece robe Cody ordered and Michael hated covered the skimpy night gown Trevor had given her. She was glad she remembered when she found Mary with a glass of milk and small stack of cookies.

"Hey, girlie." Her hair was a mess, her lips swollen, and Poppy wondered if they'd been enjoying similar past times. "Feeling okay?"

"Yep. I couldn't sleep so I came to mooch cookies," she confessed, taking two from the cow shaped container. After grabbing a glass she sat beside Mary. "Only a little milk please."

"Okay. I won't tattle." Mary passed her the gallon, and they sat quietly eating their cookies in the warm kitchen. "Sure you're okay, honey? Isn't this your second night up?"

"I guess it is." The first delicious treat sitting nicely in her belly, she started on a second.

"Is there something bothering you?" Mary nudged a cookie over.

"Maybe." She thought about her day again. Sometimes she missed things that weighed on her mind later. It was part of pregnancy brain, at least her brain on pregnancy hormones. "Oh, shoot, now I know. Cody was being dumb earlier."

"Imagine that." Mary chuckled. "Sweetie, I know your mother died when you were very young so I'll depart a piece of critical information passed from mother to daughter. Males are dumb. Even the most intelligent, sweetest man in the world has something about him that will aggravate the hell out of women. Sadly, as much as I tried to reverse the effects, my sons were genetically inflicted with the trait from their fathers. What did he do?"

"He was in the gym working out like a crazy person this morning." She wrinkled her nose at the memory of him coated in sweat. Ranching and intercourse sweat was sexy. Treadmill sweat, not so sexy. "I asked him what he was doing, and he muttered something about Trevor and getting into better shape. At the time, I didn't think about it but tonight he was goofy too. I hope he doesn't think I want him to change. I love his body just the way it is."

“Hmm.” In the dim light she saw Mary smile. “A little bit of competition, huh? It’s normal. A little reassurance will go a long way for Baby Boy. He’s sensitive about his belly, but he’s always been built differently from Michael and Trevor. Just like Paul. When Paul was about thirty he started bulking up, Thomas didn’t, he’s—”

“A perfect specimen of all that is male.” The twin in discussion ambled from their hall in boxers and his pinstriped work shirt half open. “What are you girls doing up?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Mary said. Poppy looked away and fought her blush when Thomas gave his wife a “hello” kiss that lasted ten seconds longer than appropriate. “Neither could Poppy, so we’re talking about our men. Cody’s working out again.”

Thomas pulled a small bottle of wine from the fridge. “He’s done that a few times, Poppy. He’ll get over it if you work your feminine wiles. What did you used to tell Paul, sweetie? About the party?”

“Oh.” Mary turned with a naughty grin. “I would simply say, what fun is a party if all you get is a six pack or a keg? Variety is one of the best parts of a relationship like this, and I know I’m not alone when I say that I appreciate my men for their differences.”

“Absolutely.” They laughed and clinked their glasses in feminine camaraderie.

“Is that milk?” Joining them in thin cotton pajama pants and no shirt over his very thin upper body, Duane looked like an older, less buff version of Trevor.

“Just a little,” Poppy promised. “It’s the first today.”

“Okay, good, good.” He pulled a bottle of water from the fridge and joined Thomas leaning against the counter. “What are we talking about?”

“Kegs and six packs.” Thomas lifted the front tails of his shirt, revealing a very impressive set of abs. “Something you don’t have to worry about, you bastard.”

Mary giggled, Duane grinned hugely, and Poppy didn’t get it until Mary leaned over and whispered in her ear.

She was grateful her mouth was empty because the men would have gotten a shower as she burst out in surprised laughter. Duane tipped his head and saluted her with his water bottle, Thomas laughing as he tried to shoot dark looks at his cousin.

“You don’t have to thank me.” Duane held his hands up modestly. “It was a gift I was happy to pass to my sons.”

“That modest, demure sense of humor.” Still laughing, Mary nudged another cookie toward Poppy. “That’s why I’ve always thought Trevor is his.”

“Yeah, and the fact that the boy’s a string bean and hung like a rhino was a clue.” She must have looked surprised because Thomas smiled. “We don’t have penis showing parties or anything like that, but the boy was never shy. He wouldn’t keep clothes on until he went to kindergarten and even then it was iffy. In high school he was back to being naked all the damn time. I can’t remember how many times I visited LA and had to remind him to close his bedroom and bathroom doors.”

Poppy laughed and could see Trevor not caring about clothes. He still barely closed doors and more often than not walked around bare-chested.

"They're all mine." Duane elbowed his cousin. "Don't worry, Poppy, there are good genes in all three of them, from me, so those pretty girls of yours will be as near to perfect as possible."

"Oh, not this again." Thomas rolled his eyes. "She's pregnant with twins, you moron, which means one of my boys got her and since they are all my boys it doesn't matter who."

"And how many times have I told you the twin thing doesn't matter?" Duane countered.

"Where the hell is everyone?"

Poppy leaned back in her stool and looked toward the sound of the voice to find Paul standing in the dark hall outside their bedrooms, rubbing his face with both hands. Naked.

"Oh, geeze." She jerked upright on her stool so fast she nearly fell off.

"Speaking of running around naked." Mary giggled. "Sorry, sweetie. As you can see, Trevor comes by his preferences honestly. Since the boys grew up and stay on their own side at night, Paul's gotten in touch with his inner nudist. Paul, honey, go put some pants on if you're coming out here."

"Now why would I do that, sweetheart?" he replied. "I'll just have to take them off when I put you up on the counter and—"

"Poppy's out here, you old horn ball," Duane announced.

Paul cursed and the bedroom door slammed shut. Mary's giggles were contagious and Poppy couldn't help joining in, laughing so hard she was gasping by the time Paul rejoined them, conspicuously overdressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

"Sorry, darlin'." Paul's whole face was the color of a beet, much the same as Cody's when he was embarrassed. "It didn't cross my mind you'd be out here this time of night or I'd have been much more...or less..."

"More clothed and less naked," Thomas provided and offered his twin a beer.

"Exactly."

She watched the three men and knew she was seeing her boys in thirty years. God willing, they'd be healthy, virile men and if she was really lucky, and these days she was feeling incredibly so, they'd look at her the way their fathers looked at Mary. She wasn't wearing makeup, her hair was a mess and she was wearing a frumpy flannel nightgown. The hooded looks each man wore promised Mary was in for a hell of a night. There was no doubt in Poppy's mind they loved their wife, and the smile Mary always wore made her equally as certain Mary loved them just as much. Thirty-seven years together and the sparks were still flying.

"Aren't we worried about turning into pumpkins?" Paul was as subtle as a brick in the best of times, with nocturnal activities on his mind Poppy very much felt like the fifth wheel.

"Yeah, I suppose I'd better let you guys get back to bed." Poppy hefted herself off the stool, feeling heavy in body but much lighter in heart. "Thanks for the cookies and conversation."

“Our pleasure, honey.” Mary took a break from scowling at Paul to smile at her. “Are you sure you’re ready to go to bed? I don’t mind staying up with you a while longer.”

All three men groaned, but Poppy smiled in response. “Thanks, Mary, but I’m fine. Have a good night. See you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Poppy.”

She heard Mary taking the men to task for running her off. It didn’t last long though, and she walked faster when the giggling started. It wouldn’t be easy, but she wanted the relationship she continued to witness. They had years between them, adding strength to their marriage, but Poppy knew from Mary that things had started hot and fast and hadn’t burned out.

There was a spark between Poppy and her men, but it needed more time and attention to burn like their parents’ love. Although they wanted her, they were still learning about her, and themselves for that matter. She turned down the hall leading to their bedrooms, each step slower as the night caught up. That’s how it happened, one minute she’d be raring to go, the next she was exhausted.

The door to her room opened before she reached it. There to greet her were her men. Much like their dads they were in various stages of dress, rather undress, but unlike the older versions, she found these men irresistible and wasn’t feeling so sleepy anymore.

“Hey, babe.” With only his tight boxer briefs holding Trevor in, she was suddenly approaching perky. “Why are you up again? Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine.” She wrapped her arms around her middle to keep from touching them. “I was chatting with your parents. Why are you guys up?”

“You weren’t here and Cody tried to kiss me,” Michael said. He shot a dirty look to the youngest brother, and she fought back a laugh. “I was going to kick his ass quick and go back to bed.”

“Oh, so you have plans.” She let her robe slip, baring her naked shoulder in the dim hall light. “You wouldn’t consider changing them for me, would you, Big Guy?”

They each immediately perked up, and Poppy felt her lips curl in a self-satisfied grin. Not every lesson on their path to a great relationship had to be painful.

Chapter 17

“Do you have this in blue? No, not the one piece, definitely the bikini. Does it come in a thong?”

“You better be buying for yourself, Trevor Paul.” Poppy couldn’t believe the not-so-innocent order was the first thing she heard when she, Michael and Cody entered the store.

They had flown to LA, first-class again because all her men needed the extra leg room. Before settling her in their hotel for a post-flight nap, she watched Trevor slip into LA mode, quickly getting in touch with some contacts. She’d fallen asleep listening to him chat with a man named Rebis while he rubbed her feet.

When she woke, Trevor was already out, running errands according to Cody, but he’d lined up a limo with a very experienced LA driver to get them around without him. Trevor texted while Poppy showered, announcing his meetings had finished early and he would meet them at the boutique. She watched out the car window as they passed strip malls, condos and hotels, and knew they’d entered the part of Los Angeles the movies always portrayed when big box stores became tiny boutiques with odd names.

The store they entered was trendy and, well, trendy, she decided, looking around at the bizarre shapes and colors painted on the walls, ceiling and floor. Two associates, tall skinny women with spiky hair, occupied the space, neither smiling as they looked her over, tape measures in hand. She was a faithful Target shopper with a weakness for sales at Macy’s, so whatever they had in mind was beyond her comfort zone.

“Awe, come on, babe.” Just short of a whine, Trevor’s words broke her from her thoughts. “It’s just a swimming suit. You’ll love it. It can be my Christmas present.”

“We’ll see.” As Poppy glanced around she realized she was in a clothing store that had a few pictures of clothes...but no clothes. She couldn’t help wonder where everything was. “So, what are we supposed to do now?”

“I bought an hour of private shopping.” He handed one of the associates a credit card and walked over to Poppy, kissing her cheek. “Head to the back and get naked. Lilith and Raz will bring stuff for you to try. One pile for anything you like, and dump what you don’t.”

It sounded simple enough, yet twenty minutes later Poppy was near tears as she looked at the mound of rejects. She’d tried to keep an open mind but every piece she’d tried on was in the stack. They kept offering things and the mountain of horrible clothing kept growing.

The original designs were well made in nice fabrics, but she couldn’t get past how extreme they were. Most were cut low to her cleavage, tight to her breasts and stomach, and meant to stretch as she grew, not drape. The colors were crazily limited to black and various shades of neon. The

style was all the rage, Lilith assured her, including leather pants with complicated zippers that allowed for growth, but not too much. Nothing was soft or sweet or all that comfortable, even when she managed to find something that fit.

Everything had to be dry-cleaned and as she'd learned over Thanksgiving, "dry-clean only" didn't work for her due to her amazing new gift for spilling things. Her favorite white blouse was the latest casualty of the clumsiness pregnancy caused. Spilling barbeque sauce on one of her clearance bought t-shirts was one thing, dripping it on a two hundred dollar blouse was another.

She looked in the tri-mirror at the latest outfit. The black snakeskin motif cigarette pants and a black knit top were tight, with a slash of white from one shoulder diagonal across her belly. She bit her lip to still its shaking as a tear fell down to the tip of her nose.

"Very modern," Lilith, the dark-haired associate, praised. The woman was patently insane if she thought the outfit was anything but horrid. "Especially if you did your makeup, maybe straighten your hair and add some color. Dark, I think, maybe even black to contrast your skin."

Raz, who'd been quiet, spoke up, sending Lilith to get the men. "Sweetie, put your other clothes back on." The theatrical tone she'd used with Trevor and Lilith was gone and the emo, emaciated woman sounded like any other woman. "My cousin is the designer here, and he makes a mint on this stuff. I didn't wear it when I was pregnant. I enjoyed eating, airflow, and not having every bulge showcased. Do you need some help to get out of that?"

"Oh, thank God." Poppy gladly accepted the hand Raz offered and tried not to rip the transparent t-shirt. "I just...I hate of this stuff so much."

"I don't blame you." Raz snorted in amusement. "My cousin, Jarrod, thinks this is cutting edge and fabulous. I think it's ugly as sin, but it pays the bills, ya know?"

Awkwardly wiggling out of the snakeskin pants, Poppy nodded and Raz held her elbow to help her keep her balance. "They're so tight, it's like they're growing into my skin. How can people wear these? Gosh, finally," she panted when her legs were free. "Can you recommend somewhere else? I don't want to hurt Trevor's feelings, but I don't want to wear any of this either. No offence."

"None taken." Raz laughed and began jotting down directions on the back of the shop's business card. "I'd try a place called Baby Bee. They sell fun and feminine clothes that are also modern, in the good way, and stay out of the muumuu category. Try their camisoles. They also have some sexed-up prego panties for your boys. Thongs didn't work for me, but my boyfriend liked the lacy ones I bought there."

"How old is your child?" Back in her powder blue track suit, Poppy could breathe again.

"Two. He's out with his daddy today." The brothers rounded the corner into the back room. "Ah, here they are. Gentlemen, this isn't the store for Poppy. There's another up the street with different styles she'll be more comfortable in. Lilith, refund Mr. Patrich's deposit."

Trevor looked confused, Michael concerned, and Cody couldn't hide his relief. She figured the clothes scared him too, so she hugged him while Trevor did business. She was worried he would be annoyed by the change of plans and smiled apologetically. Even back in her own clothes the store seemed to close in around her, so she hustled Cody into the thick LA air but out of the creepy shop.

Once in the limo on their way to Baby Bee, she relaxed. "I know you went to a lot of trouble, Trev, but nothing fit right. I'm sorry. I'm glad you got your deposit back."

Something flashed in Trevor's eyes at her apology, and Poppy wondered if she'd hurt his feelings more than she thought. "I'm not the one wearing the shit. I'd rather shop around and get what you like than buy crap you don't." He pulled out his cell and retreated from the conversation.

She sometimes forgot she wasn't the only one new to relationships. Yes, the brothers knew more from living with their parents, but other than Michael, none of them had had lasting, monogamous relationships. They knew in theory what they wanted and knew how to work together sexually, but she was seeing more and more that they had the same insecurities she did. Since their night in front of the fire she'd thought Trevor understood her feelings, but apparently he'd just gotten better at hiding his disquieted times.

The next shop was friendlier and as Raz assured her, soft and sweet. The owner set her up in a room, and Poppy knew Michael and Cody liked the clothes because they brought her several different things to try. Trevor sat on the spouse bench with his BlackBerry, looking up and nodding absently when asked his opinion, but she saw he was no longer part of the trip.

"I'll be right back, Poppy." Rita, the store's owner hustled out when the phone rang, leaving her alone in a light green cashmere sweater and gray yoga pants with added panels made of a thick, stretchy fabric.

"Trevor?" Poppy called, and like before, he popped his head in but she wasn't going to let him leave again. "Can you come here a second?"

"Of course." He entered the luxurious dressing room complete with cushioned stools, benches and Belgian chocolate. She stepped up on the bench, Trevor quickly there to help. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I want to hug you." The added height allowed her to cuddle his face to her breasts, a special favorite of his. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He relaxed into her, but his hands hugged her hard as if he was worried she would pull away, and she knew she'd done something wrong.

"Don't lie to me, Middle Man," she said sternly. "I really am sorry I didn't like the other store."

"That's not your fault. I should have known you wouldn't like that shit. I thought after the other night I wouldn't make these mistakes anymore, damn it. This." She felt his fingers slip under the hem of her shirt. "This is you. It's pretty and sweet, like you. I know that."

“That’s why you’re upset, because you think you should have known about maternity clothes?” There were words he needed to hear, she thought as she rubbed his back. Words that she’d been holding but couldn’t any longer. “What do you think matters more to me, handsome? Your taste in maternity wear or how you treat me? You try so hard, Trevor, don’t you dare be down when the results don’t match the effort.

“The past few weeks we’ve been doing better. Remember when I made pineapple cupcakes and you ate them even though you’re allergic, because you were worried about making me feel bad? You ate the cupcakes, and on second thought, wearing the thong wouldn’t be a big deal if it makes you smile. I’m sorry. I’d never intentionally hurt you, not for the world. I promised, remember?”

“I remember.” The relief in his voice was matched in her heart as the tension eased. “I know you wouldn’t hurt any of us on purpose, you’re too sweet for that, and I will always eat whatever you offer.” His wicked grin was back, and she couldn’t help but smile in return. “You make these clothes look pretty. Are you finding things you like?”

“Yep.” She slowly shimmied her hips until her pants slid past her butt. “I know it’s not a thong, but what do you think of these panties?”

He looked over his shoulder, making sure the curtain was closed she knew, before he bent lower. “Ooh, nice. I like these a lot. Are these ties? These have to be the greatest invention of all time. How could I not like panties that gift wrap my favorite thing in the world? What are they made of? Are they comfortable?”

“Brushed cotton. They are very breathable, comfortable, and I hope you think a little sexy.” She suddenly felt shy under his intense scrutiny, face to face with her crotch.

He cupped the softly covered curve of her ass, and she knew she had his approval. “So sexy, baby. Rita recommended a lingerie store up the block for bras and night gowns, so hopefully they’ll have more like these to choose from. I personally like you in red, but Michael will like the blue best.”

“Maybe some black and white ones for Cody.”

Trevor looked confused for a moment, then laughed. “Baby Boy and his stupid cows. You know, he’s fascinated with the breast pumps Rita has set up out there. He has plans to improve them.” He was still laughing as he helped her smooth her pants over her backside, showing just as much care in dressing her as he did undressing her.

“Milksters.” She laughed, and heard a light tap on the door frame.

“All right in there, Poppy?” Rita asked.

“Yep.” She tugged Trevor close again when he started moving away. “I’ll be right out.”

“Take your time, hon. Cody, Michael and I are finding some very nice things for you, and I ordered some lunch too,” Rita called, leaving the curtain untouched.

“Trevor.” She ran her fingers through the black curls on his head. “Okay, now?”

“Definitely. You always make me feel better.” Obviously enjoying the hug, he rubbed his face between her breasts.

"Trevor?"

"Yes, Poppy?" he asked, amusement in his voice.

"I love you." The words almost stuck in her throat, but she pushed them out because they were true and he needed them. "Very much."

His arms were nearly bruising but he didn't talk or move, and she couldn't make herself ask him to ease up. It took long minutes before he loosened his hold, stepping back and helping her down from the bench. He looked a little stunned. She knew the feeling. Sometimes she was so overwhelmed by what was happening, she would grab onto one of them and hold on. They didn't demand answers and never stepped away before she was ready. Doing the same for Trevor gave them something special.

"I'm going to love you forever." His hands were gentle as he cradled her chin between them, his height making her look at his neck for a moment until he tilted her face so they were eye to eye. "It means everything that you love me. Everything."

"You, Cody, and Michael are my family now. It's taken a while and I know we have difficult times ahead, but I also know the three of you are going to be with me each step of the way. I know you, Trevor, are going to be the one making me laugh and making me feel like I can yell, scream, and cry and still be loved when the tantrum passes." Her nose burned with tears, but she didn't hate the emotions. She could stand to shed a few joyful tears. "I adore you."

"Goddamn." He lifted her in a hard hug again, making her laugh when he spun around. "Let's finish up here. I want you behind closed doors. No, I want you dressed up for dinner and dancing, and then I want you naked. You might need another nap for what I have in mind. Hell, you might need two."

"Hey, Trev, quit screwing around. Lunch is here." Cody peeked in. "Are you two okay?"

"Baby Boy, things couldn't be better." The love in his eyes overflowed as he continued to look at her, and she couldn't have agreed more.

Chapter 18

It didn't surprise Poppy that Trevor's night out was spent at the chef's table in one of LA's best restaurants. She wore a new dress with a high gathered collar, demure long sleeves and a hem that fell inches shy of her knees. Every day she was feeling better physically and emotionally. As her confidence grew, she felt more like the woman she wanted to be.

She flirted with her men, enjoying their grins. The jealous looks some of the women around them shot her weren't so bad either. She'd never been the pretty one, never been the one other women wished they were, and she really found the feeling suited her.

"Here, darlin', try a bite of this." Cody offered a piece of pork chop with peach and blueberry glaze. "It's a little sweet, so I think you'll like it."

"Mmm, just like you." She accepted the bite and the light kiss it came with, and took a teasing moment to deliberate. "Hmm, you're better."

Cody blushed but kept on grinning. Even out of his comfort zone, which only stretched to Morris, she could see he was having a good time.

"This place is pretty fancy, Trev. Do you come here often?" she asked.

"Not often enough to keep my wait staff happy," the chef announced with a chuckle. Karl was tall and handsome in the tanned surfer sort of way, she thought, but not to her tastes. "They like the mountain men, especially the ones who tip fifty percent. Mrs. Patrich, you are the envy of all the women, and a few of the men as well."

"If they really knew what they were missing they'd hate my guts." Sassy was a new feeling she was trying, and she found herself enjoying very much. "This has all been wonderful, really wonderful."

"I like to cook for people who like to eat." He shrugged and placed a small bowl of gorgeous peach sorbet in front of her. "Trevor must bring you back when you feel better. I enjoy the challenge of a specific diet, but I think you would like a few other things on the menu."

"Like the chocolate." She looked longingly at the chocolate mousse she couldn't eat, because her dairy allowance had been filled by ice cream after shopping. "This is good though. I didn't know peaches could taste like this."

Michael crooked his finger. His eyes sparkled mischievously as she leaned closer, sharing a taste of his chocolate pudding straight from his lips. She couldn't miss the look Karl gave them before he checked with Trevor, who had introduced her as his wife, as if expecting him to explode.

"Affectionate."

"Let it go, Karl," Trevor advised in a nonchalant way she hoped to develop over time. "So what do you think, Cody? I know you're more of a steak and potatoes kind of guy, but this is one of the best places in LA to get real food."

“Very good.” All but licking his dessert bowl, his actions spoke louder than words. “Beats the hell out of the box stuff.”

Karl winced at the announcement and in his element, Trevor laughed. “LA is making you a food snob, Karl. Your beef supplier has nothing on Cody. Baby brother knows how to grow a hell of a steak. You should give him a call when you’re interested in having the best beef in the country.”

Poppy smiled, pleased with the way they treated each other, especially in public. There was competition and teasing but here, with others, they made each other look the best they could. Cody had the least in common with the LA crowd but Trevor was giving a starting point, and it filled her with pride for her men.

“Ah, the entertainment is starting.” Music began from beyond the kitchen doors and ever the gracious host, Karl pointed out the obvious. “Trevor, would your wife enjoy a dance?”

“Hmm, haven’t done that yet, not with clothes on anyway,” he added. She swatted him playfully and he grinned. “What do you think, babe? Are you up for a dance if we take it real slow?”

“Sugar, do you even know what slow is?”

The others snickered as he led her to the small dance floor where several other couples already swayed to the music.

Dancing, even with her brothers-in-law, had been against her father’s stringent rules, so having Trevor hold her close as the band played fulfilled one of her oldest desires. The music changed to something faster but he continued to sway slowly, the long hug warming to her core.

At times he waved to acquaintances, even spoke briefly to a few and introduced her to business associates. She’d only seen the skuzzy office side of his work, but she realized he was working now even as he entertained her. The look he gave her each time he introduced her as his wife and mother of his babies made her feel like the most beautiful woman on the planet. If there was any doubt remaining about Trevor being like her father, it was gone before the second spin.

Cody cut in after two songs, Trevor heading to the bar where Michael sat with a drink. She knew they watched, because she could feel their eyes on her as she swayed in Cody’s arms. He couldn’t seem to find the beat, but she didn’t mind because like with Trevor, she could find nothing wrong when hugging to music.

“We should do this more.” She leaned back in his arms and smiled. “Dance, I mean, at home.”

“Maybe with Trevor. Michael and I aren’t good at this. I have no rhythm, and Mike’s got two left feet.” His candor made her smile. “Big left feet that step on little toes according to his high school prom date.”

“I can’t say that I care.” Content to shuffle along with the music, she laid her head back on his chest. “The band is great. I get to wrap myself around you, no matter the song, and I get to show you off. I can always stand on Michael’s big feet to avoid crushing if I need to.”

He chuckled a little before draping her arms around his middle and wrapping his forearms around her shoulders, holding her as close as could be in public. "I am so damn proud of you, sweetheart. I know this has all been beyond what you thought you could handle, but I'm so glad you're still with us."

"That means a lot, Cody. Thank you." His simple words summed up what she felt but couldn't find the words to say. She was proud of them too, just hadn't recognized it in the abundant emotions surrounding her. "I was afraid I wouldn't be enough for the three of you, or you three would be too much for me, but not anymore. Now I think I'm too happy to worry about being afraid."

"Good, then we're doing something right." He pressed his mouth to her ear, his breath warming her from outside in. "Tell me I can say it, darlin'."

"Oh, Cody, I—"

"Poppy." Trevor's untimely interruption took her attention from Cody.

Hating to lose the moment, she dug her fingers into Cody's shirt before she turned to Trevor when he continued speaking. "Sorry, guys. Your purse was vibrating, babe, so I checked your phone. I didn't open anything, but you've got thirty messages from someone. I thought they might be important."

"Did you see from who?" The moment with Cody had to wait, but as they followed Trevor toward the relative quiet of the bar, it was his hand she grasped.

"Rose, maybe?" Trevor shrugged. "I'm not sure. I didn't want to look too hard since it's your phone, but I think they're all from the same person."

"Rose is my oldest sister. If she texted that much it must be important. I should call her now."

She looked at her phone. Trevor was right about Rose's messages, but her battery died before she could open any past the first one which only said "call now" in all capital letters.

"Here, honey." Trevor handed over his much coveted BlackBerry before she could ask. "Let's go by the restrooms so you can have some privacy."

She couldn't say she was close to any of her sisters, especially lately, but she was closest to Rose. As the oldest she'd taken over a few of the more maternal roles when she'd been around. It was Rose who potty trained her and walked her to the bus. As adults they didn't have much in common but Poppy adored her nephews, Jonathan and Alexander. Even Rose's husband Greg wasn't hard to get along with.

"Tallendaggo residence." A young voice answered on the second ring and she couldn't help but smile, despite the tension she felt.

"Wow, that's a lot of name for such a little guy." She always teased because it made her nephews laugh, and their happiness was important to her.

"Auntie Poppy! Mom couldn't find you, and Grandpa said you ran away." Recognizable by his lisp, Jonathon rushed everything he said. "Where have you been? You missed Thanksgiving. I got to do the wishbone with Alex and I won."

"That's great, buddy, and I didn't run away. I'm just staying with some friends. Is your mom close?" She would rather talk to the little boy for hours, listening to his stories and the crazy things his imagination came up with, but there had to be a reason Rose left so many urgent messages.

"Yep, here she comes. Love you, Auntie."

She waited while a static shuffle ensued and gave Trevor a reassuring smile.

"Poppy, where are you? You need to be in San Antonio."

"I'm in Los Angeles right now, but if it's important I can be there tomorrow." Her sudden concern overcame the bristling she felt at her sister's command.

"Is your nephew's life important enough?" Rose snapped. "Alexander has leukemia. The doctor wants everyone in the family to have blood and marrow available for matching. Everyone's done it except you, and you owe me. You know you do."

"Rose, this isn't about owing anything. I'll be there as soon as I'm able because I love my nephew." She repeated her promise twice before Rose finally let her hang up.

She stared at the phone, shocked. Her nephew's illness was serious. Even after years of research and medical advancements in the best hospitals in the world, childhood cancer wasn't always curable. Leukemia killed thousands of kids every year, and her nephew could be a statistic.

Trevor waited a few feet away, his concern showing in the way he fiddled with his shirt buttons. She knew he wanted to ask, but he was willing to give her a moment and she was grateful for that.

"My nephew, his name is Alexander. He has leukemia. His treatment is going pretty well, but they want blood and marrow from the family members. I have to go."

Trevor nodded and gently took his phone from her shaking hand to call for the car. Stuck with ugly possibilities running through her mind, she didn't notice the ride to the hotel. They were back in record time, Cody holding her the whole time as Michael made calls to the airport and Trevor did rapid research online.

Waiting was the hardest thing, but it didn't make sense to fly out in the middle of the night as the tests couldn't be done until the next morning anyway. They stayed the night in LA, and while she appreciated the brothers trying to help her relax and rest, they were all dragging the next morning when they made their way through the airports.

Their plane landed at nine o'clock. Poppy, Michael, Trevor and Cody piled into a rental car and were at San Antonio Children's Hospital by ten. Another car followed them, security Trevor set up when he called and found the drag race shooter was out on bail. Michael was following the case closely and the racer, a Japanese native with an American work visa, had his lawyers working like mad to avoid jail time. They didn't expect trouble, but weren't taking any chances either.

Poppy's mind wasn't on the two inconspicuous men following them as they entered the hospital. The Tallendaggo name went far in the hospital, because one of the great-grandfathers was a founding member decades earlier. The technician at the reception desk was friendly, prompt and nauseatingly eager to please.

Poppy tried to bite back her sarcasm and knee jerk rudeness at the kiss-ass tech, but it wasn't easy when her nerves were shot, her feet hurt and exhaustion was setting in.

"Ms. Maguire, we received a fax from your doctor about your condition." The lab coat clad, impossibly perky young woman led them to a private draw room. "We won't do marrow samples at this time, and we'll keep the blood to essential tests only."

"Duane?" Poppy asked Trevor, who nodded. "Listen, my doctor also happens to think he's my father-in-law, so if he's being overcautious—"

"No, not at all. The request is very reasonable and our doctors agree. The procedure can be uncomfortable, and since Alexander is doing well and we have other possible donors it's not imperative we have a full work up on you." Within minutes, the tech had Poppy prepped, blood drawn and the draw spot covered with cotton balls. "That, of course, could change in the months to come, but for now we'll do a partial work up. Dr. Paraby said there would be three more?"

"We're not blood family, but you can check." To Poppy's amazement Michael and the others began rolling up their sleeves. "We'll do the marrow thing too."

"We'll start with blood. Being a direct relative doesn't always matter, but the blood and tissue compatibility test we run will let us know fairly soon if any of you are a good match. If he does need a transplant, we'll see who is the closest and go from there."

Poppy accepted a juice box from Trevor as the tech readied three more draw trays.

They each offered their arm, Cody last and dead white, but he toughed it out, concentrating on the wall in front of him. His intensity made her wonder if he was trying to hold it up or knock it down.

"I'll let you relax for a few minutes, so take your time and make sure he drinks his juice before standing. That's a lot of man to pick up off the floor, and we don't need the room for an hour." She didn't appreciate the tech's observation. Cody didn't need his weakness pointed out any more than necessary.

Near tears, Poppy had never been so touched. They offered so much, especially Cody who was physically ill just giving blood, and for a little boy they didn't even know, because of her. They would lie on a table, be cut open and have needles pushed into their backs if it was asked, because it was the right thing to do. Little beads of sweat remained on Cody's forehead as she offered him a juice box. He barely looked at her, so she tore it open and nudged the straw to his lips.

"Cody Paraby, I love you so much." Holding his cheek to the side of her belly as he finally sipped, she reached down and kissed his head. "You are brave and wonderful, and I'm so proud of you. Thank you. Thank all of you so much."

"The little guy's family," Michael replied. She knew it was what Cody would have said if he hadn't been dangerously close to losing his airplane breakfast. "If your sister needs anything for him, let us know. Trev's richer than God, and Cody and I don't do so badly, either."

"That's so generous." She smiled because she had to or tears would fall and she'd had enough of those for a while. "Volunteering Trevor's money for the cause."

They laughed as she'd hoped, but she knew every offer was genuine. Even if their money wasn't accepted they would find other ways to help, because that's the kind of people their parents raised them to be.

"So, are we done here?" Cody took several more deep breaths, and she was happy to see color seeping back into his cheeks, albeit slowly.

She kissed his sweat-damp brow. "I think so, Baby Boy. I'm so proud of you. So proud. Would you like a popsicle?"

"I'm not six, Poppy." Knowing he was cranky from blood loss and nausea, she let his grumpy response pass.

"Sounds good though, doesn't it?" She pressed the nurse's call button before he replied.

After a popsicle, Cody looked human enough for her to agree to leave the hospital. The tech, though snarky, was right, he was too big of a fella to scrape off the floor, and she was happy to see him back to himself after a little time and sugar. He was always so strong, and though he told her not to, she felt guilty for putting him through everything. He said it wasn't her fault, but it felt like it was.

She had every intention of making it up to him as soon as they were alone. They were staying in a hotel, one of the nicer ones but not the one from their first night together. Trevor tried to reserve the room when she mentioned wanting to see it again, but another racing convention was in town and the place was booked solid.

Trevor drove on the way to the hotel, his ease on the crazy San Antonio highways more than she could ever claim even after living there her whole life. She didn't miss the gridlock and exhaust or the hours she sometimes spent stuck in traffic when an accident blocked the way. It usually only happened when she forgot her book and she would end up staring at the car in front of her long into the night. When Michael helped her out of the car in the parking ramp she kept an eye on Cody, smiling compassionately when he took his time getting out of his side.

"Hey, Big Guy." Standing on her tiptoes so Cody couldn't hear her whisper, she tugged Michael closer. "Do you think you and Trevor could give me and Baby Boy a few minutes in the room?"

They looked at Cody, who was leaning against the roof of the rental car, obviously still lightheaded, but he glanced up and gave a weak smile. "I'm fine." He added a wink for her benefit, but it lacked its usual sparkle.

"No problem, beautiful," Michael murmured very quietly, then rounded the car to support his brother. "Come on, Baby Boy. Let's get you stretched out before you're kissing concrete."

Five minutes later, good to his word, Michael took Trevor down to the gift shop and to her surprise, Trevor didn't balk. He didn't like being left out of anything and it was something the other brothers didn't mind accommodating, but he wasn't oblivious. Cody needed a little extra loving, he could see it and she was grateful he didn't fuss.

After using the bathroom, her new favorite activity as the twins grew, she headed to the bedroom. Sure enough, Cody remained exactly where his brothers helped him lie. She crossed the floor and sat near the end of the bed, carefully pulling off his boots. He lifted his feet one at a time so they weren't heavy, and she soon had the confining shoes off.

His socks were incredibly white, almost new. They probably were. He preferred new socks, he'd confessed late one night after she'd talked him into giving her a strip tease. The dance had been more adorable than sexy and he'd left his socks on, which was why she'd asked. He liked how new socks felt on his feet and never wore a single pair long enough to make holes in them. Michael foraged through his castoffs and hadn't bought socks in years, while Cody bought a pack every month.

She rubbed his feet and squeezed his ankles and toes until the tension eased from them. He didn't move, didn't make any sounds, and she wished she could help him. Seeing him laid up was breaking her heart.

"What do you need, Baby Boy?" She gave his foot one more pat. "Can I bring you anything? Do anything to make you feel better?"

He groaned and took his forearm away from his eyes. They were bloodshot with fatigue just like her own felt. "You have to ask me when I'm six inches from puking, don't ya?" He held open his arms for her. "Come here, darlin'."

She was careful not to shake the bed when she moved beside him. He pulled her closer until she was nuzzled to the crook of his neck, touching from head to toe, though her toes touched his knees.

"I've finally got you back where I always want you and I'm too sick to do anything about it." He chuckled and she couldn't help but press a kiss to his pulsing neck.

"Like old times, huh?" she teased. "You and me in a hotel, cuddled up in bed, trying to get a few things done before your brothers get back."

"You knew they were coming that night?"

Cody sounded so incredulous she had to bite back a laugh. He hadn't admitted it, but she knew he felt guilty about their first night. There had been a level of deception in their first coupling, and he didn't like that sort of smudging of lines between them.

"Of course. Honey, every woman that's ever met you knows what you three do. If they hadn't shown up, I would have been shocked. Not disappointed, not when I would have spent the night loving you, but I would have been mighty surprised."

"Huh, so much for my super tricky deception." There was relief in his voice which was sounding stronger as time passed. "So, the last time it was just the two of us, we were having a discussion."

"We were," she agreed, remembering very well where the conversation had drifted on the dance floor. "You told me how proud you are of me and asked if I was ready to listen to what you had to say. Then I got interrupted before I said you couldn't possibly love me as much as I love you."

"Oh, yeah?" He tried for nonchalance, but she felt his pulse skyrocket. "All of that, huh?"

"Yep." His neck was closest so she kissed it again. "You've been waiting and I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you wonder about how I felt, Baby Boy. I've loved you for a long time."

"Since when?" he asked, and then swore. "Damn, are guys even supposed to say crap like that?"

"My guys can. They can say all the sweet crap in the world, and I won't tell. It started in the hospital after I was shot. I just wasn't ready yet. You didn't love me, yet you never left. After that, I think I fell the rest of the way when you drove into town after working all day to buy pasteurized eggs from SaraJean. I was craving cookie dough and you thought it wouldn't be safe with the regular ones."

"It wouldn't have." He instantly defended, like she knew he would. "Salmonella isn't something you want, darlin'. You think you had it rough the last time we were in San An, tangling with salmonella will knock you on your ass."

"I know, and I love that you care so much." She rubbed her hand across the soft, wash worn flannel of his shirt. "I love you, and loving you makes me happy."

"Good." The solemn tone of his voice showed how her words affected him. Since he was born, people loved him. That her affection and esteem mattered so much humbled her. "Damn, I wish I was feeling up to showing you how much I love you."

"It's okay, Baby Boy." She pushed to her elbows and softly kissed his mouth, careful not to move him too much. "How about a rain check?"

"That would be great." His face, drawn with discomfort, looked relieved.

"But for now we'll take a nap." Retaking her spot, she sighed happily and closed her eyes. "You'll feel better after you sleep. I promise."

Chapter 19

Poppy stretched before opening her eyes and knew Cody wasn't beside her. The nap would have perked him up and the smells around told her his appetite returned. A commercial for Viagra played on TV, the announcer's warning about the four hour erection always making her smirk. She thought about going back to sleep but the scent of food increased and the bed dipped.

"Good morning, sunshine." Michael kissed her before setting a tray on the bed. "You look better."

"I feel better," she admitted as he helped her sit up. The out of season strawberry he popped in her mouth wasn't as juicy as the best ones, but was still a treat she would never buy for herself in the off season. "What have you three been up to?"

"Watching the race on TV." Trevor's cheek pushed out, full of food in a habit she hated and already told him wasn't being passed to their daughters. "And watching you. You're pretty damn cute when you sleep, ya know that?"

"I do now and I swear, Trevor Paul, if you talk to me with your mouth full like that one more time, I'm gonna smack that cheek."

"Crap, sorry, babe." He winced, finished chewing, swallowed and opened his mouth for inspection. "I'm working on it."

"I know." She gentled her tone, because she knew it was true. He was working on all the little things that drove her nuts, just like she worked hard to find new ways to drive him crazy. "Hey, how about we go swimming after lunch?"

The boys groaned as one, and she looked at them. During the long Texas summers, swimming was a godsend. Non-swimmers had always confused her.

"Thirty minutes, babe," Trevor reminded her ten minutes later when she was done with lunch and pulling on her new bikini.

"That's an old wives tale moms made up when they didn't want to go outside." She snapped the elastic of her bottoms. "This fits nice. Come on, boys. I'm way too cute not to have an audience."

Cody started clapping, and Trevor grinned as he joined in.

"Ah, we didn't bring our suits, beautiful." Michael tried to sound disappointed but failed miserably.

Lucky for the forgetful brothers, the hotel gift shop stocked suits of every size and fashion, so Poppy called the desk and had three pairs of black swim trunks delivered. Getting the grumbling men into the suits had taken some talking. There were more naughty promises than begging, but she got them into the pool even before Trevor's thirty minute warning expired.

Unfortunately, the hot tub was too warm but she was content to float around the swimming pool on her back, watching the clouds through the beautiful glass ceiling with her tummy sticking up. It was a little shark fin bump, bare in the bunny covered bikini Michael picked out in Los Angeles.

Unlike Trevor's pick, it covered her butt nicely and for a girl who'd always worn one piece suits, she felt incredibly comfortable showing some skin. It was hard to be self-conscious when you were busy feeling irresistible. Because Trevor hadn't whined and because she was so damn happy with them all, she'd called Raz after the hospital visit and ordered the thong to be sent home to Montana as an early Christmas present.

"Doing okay, beautiful?" Michael called from where all three brothers were busy holding up the pool wall.

"Yep. You know, I was a lifeguard in high school so if you want I could teach ya'll to swim." She smoothly glided through the water.

"We know how," Trevor grumped. "We just don't like to. If I have to be in water, I want it hot and bubbling with boobs bouncing at my chin."

"Classy, Trev, always classy." She laughed before flipping backward in the water and taking a long glide underwater, resurfacing to find the men splashing toward her. "What?"

"Shit, Poppy don't do that," Michael commanded, hands on his hips with the shallow water skimming his belly button. "You scared the crap out of Middle Man."

"Middle Man, huh?" Drawing Michael in deeper she wrapped around him when the water hit his collar bones, just over her head. "Sorry, handsome. I didn't mean to make you nervous. Thank you for earlier with Cody." She grabbed his hand and pressed it against the side of her belly. "Whoa, can you feel these babies? They really like this water."

"No problem, beautiful. We all need a little extra attention once in a while. I'm glad you're both feeling better after the nap. I can't wait until I can feel the babies moving."

She would have been surprised if he was resentful about her time with Cody, especially while he rubbed her bare belly. She felt the babies moving, but so far the hard kicks were far and few between.

"If you like swimming, there's room for a pool at the ranch."

"Really?"

"Yep, we'll build one this summer if you want, probably inside and heated so you can enjoy it all year. You can teach the babies to swim too," he added. "We'll make sure it's got all the safety stuff, but yeah, we can do that if it's something you would like."

"Poppy, your sister's on my cell," Trevor called. "No one would violate your HIPPA laws, but someone stepped on mine. Stupid hospital."

"Damn." Michael headed back toward the side, just short of pouting. "I had plans."

"Later." She loved his plans and very little would keep her away from them in the long term. He set her on the edge of the pool but stayed standing between her thighs. "Hello, Rose."

“Who are C, T, and M Patrich?” her sister demanded, without greeting.

“They’re friends of mine who want to help my nephew if they can.” Patience and understanding were important to remember, she counseled herself. “How’s Alex?”

“He’s sick,” Rose screeched, never one to handle difficulty with dignity. “Why wasn’t your marrow on the report?”

“I’m pregnant, Rose. My doctor recommended I didn’t do the test unless I’m a strong match and the situation was critical.” Good intentions shot to hell, Poppy’s hard-fought patience was eroding.

“You’re a selfish little liar. You miscarried months ago,” Rose said. “M is a very close blood match so get his ass back for more testing.”

“Rose,” she snapped coldly, fed up with her sister’s bullshit. A tense situation only got so much slack. “M is a person. His name is Michael, and he is mine, and yes, he will help Alex if he can because I love my nephew. But don’t think you get to order anyone around. I would like to talk to Alex’s doctor for more information before we go in for more testing, and damn it Rose, you will be grateful to these men who are trying to help.”

“Well, I—”

“Just stop.” The weeks away really bolstered the confidence she needed to speak her mind. “Alex is my nephew, and I want to help him. But don’t you dare shame me by being horrible to my friends. They are willing to help you because of me, and I think you can at least pretend to be grateful.”

“I—you—of course, I’m grateful,” Rose snapped. “His doctor is Anthony Redman, head of oncology at Children’s hospital. I’ll have him call you, at this number I presume?”

“That would be fine, and I would like to see the boys if they’re up for a visit.”

“Of course, they’d love that.” There was a long, awkward pause. “I apologize for what I said, Poppy. It was uncalled for, and I’m better than that. I promise I will be very polite to your friends. I’m just so overwhelmed right now. I’m his mother, and I should be able to fix him. Father says the cancer is my fault because I worked and drank coffee while I was pregnant, and guilt is piling up.”

“Rose, you were a nurse so you know those things don’t cause cancer. Lots of women work and drink coffee while they’re pregnant. Alex’s doctor would have told you the same thing.” Bitchy or not, she found she couldn’t actively hurt her sister when she was already hurting.

“I know and he did. I know better, but the guilt... Greg gets so mad at him, Father I mean, not Alex.” Confusion and pain filled Rose’s voice. “They’ve always disagreed about things, but now they actually fight. Greg won’t let Dad come over unless he’s here and Dad promises not to upset me or the boys.”

“Your husband loves you, Rose, and it sounds like he’s trying to make this easier for you. I’d listen to a man who loves me over our father any day.” Michael’s squeeze of approval said more than any words. “I’ll talk to Alex’s doctor and make the arrangements, then maybe we can stop by tonight?”

“That would be nice. I’ll have supper for all of you,” Rose said, cautiously. “Will C and T be along with Michael tonight?”

“Cody and Trevor, and yes, I’d like them to meet Alex and Jon.” She’d be lying if she said she wanted them to meet the rest of her family.

“Okay, bring them on over, we’ll be ready when you get here.”

They talked a few minutes more, exchanging details, and when she hung up all three men looked at her expectantly. “Well boys, there’s been a change in plans. I hope you packed your dress-up clothes, because now it’s your turn to meet my family.”

Chapter 20

People in the past had commented about how great it was all the Maguire sisters were nurses. What they saw as dedication was her father's bend for tyrannical behavior. Poppy wished she'd bucked the system and chosen her own career, but at eighteen she'd wanted to please him and have something in common with her sisters.

There hadn't been anything she longed to do so nursing fit. She couldn't be entirely bitter about the decision. Her grandmother had been a nurse, which was why her father respected the profession so much, and it did pay well. She'd been able to support herself right out of school and not all jobs could boast that. Buying her townhouse had been a move she could comfortably make on her own. She was a long way from her townhouse though as the car turned off the highway.

Her sister's community was much more than she could have ever hoped to afford on a nurse's pay. The exclusive, gated community was home to San Antonio's most wealthy families, and it wasn't Rose's nursing salary paying the mortgage.

She married into an incredibly wealthy family and nine months later the twins were born, securing her place in not only the Tallendaggo family but also their social circle. Poppy knew her eldest sister had never worked a day outside those few months before getting married and while pregnant, and she'd only done that because their father insisted. After the twins were born, she made a "career" out of being the wife of a wealthy man, a true southern hostess.

The home Rose shared with her husband had never been open to Poppy in the sense she could drop by for dinner. The few times she'd been in the house had been to babysit or fill an empty seat for dinner parties. The place was huge and gorgeous, and she hadn't seen more than the entertaining rooms, nursery and the twins' bedroom.

Six months ago she didn't think that was odd, even if she'd hoped it would change. Now she knew how wrong her family relationship was and didn't know if it could change.

Cars lined the circle driveway, a hybrid luxury SUV, and an expensive, imported sedan attested to a family within. The bright yellow Jaguar announced not only were the house and grounds beautiful and expensive, the people inside were as well.

"Pretty area," Trevor said as they walked past the Jaguar. "Not my style, but nice. Must have taken a lot of time, money, and lack of imagination to make everything look exactly the same. Honestly, it creeps me out. I wonder how long it will take someone to call the cops on Fred and Jack waiting out by the driveway."

"Shush." Poppy laughed. Trevor's teasing broke the thick tension that had built on the ride from the hotel. "My brother-in-law is Greg Tallendaggo, lots of old family money. I'll explain to them about the security guys. Lavender is here with her husband who is an investment banker. They have two kids, plus Rose's twins. Crissy and Lily have four more, but they both live in Arizona."

"Damn. Tons of kids. Hmm, Tallendaggo sounds familiar," Trevor said absently. Poppy took the stairs slowly, her apprehension more than her bulk making her feet heavy. "Does he do business in LA?"

"I have no idea." With Michael rubbing his hand up and down her spine as they waited at the door, she tried to remind herself she wasn't the girl she'd been the last time she'd seen her family. The wind blew straight through her light jacket, making her long for the parka she'd left at home in Michael's truck. "But he always gives me diamonds and stock options for Christmas, so he must do well enough."

"Well shit, that Tallendaggo." Trevor laughed out loud when the door opened. "Grubby, what the hell are you doing in the 'burbs?"

She stepped back as Trevor and "Grubby" Greg embraced hard, both laughing and talking at once. The huge entry was empty but it took a minute for Trevor, let alone Greg to realize they still stood out in the winter chill. "Hell, Grubby invite us in. Poppy's getting cold."

"Yes, yes, get in here." Greg welcomed them in with more exuberance and excitement than she'd ever seen from her usually reserved and professional brother-in-law. "These must be your brothers. Michael and Cody, right? I heard about you two back when I ran in the racing circuit. I haven't seen Trevor in years, not since I got married and started playing with matchbox cars instead of the big ones."

"Hell, I'm not racing anymore either," Trevor said. When he sold all of his race cars and equipment he told her it was getting boring. She knew he did it because drag racing was dangerous and he had kids to worry about being around for. His new hobby of model car building was much easier on her nerves and if it wasn't as exciting, he didn't complain. "Can't take the chances when little ones are involved."

"You've got kids now? That's great. We'll have to do a play date or something while you're in town. Poppy? What are you doing here?"

She didn't know how to answer, because what came to mind seemed too obvious. "Um, I brought Trevor and his brothers to meet Alex."

"So how do you know these guys? Wait, don't answer. You're my wife's little sister and some things are best left unsaid. Christ, you are pregnant. Rose is going to go apeshit. Don't you think it's a little irresponsible? First Steven, now—"

"Shut the fuck up, Grub." All signs of Trevor's good mood vanished when Greg's criticism made her wince. "A real, real good way to get on my bad side is to say anything negative about Poppy. Understand?"

She couldn't believe her eyes when her larger than life, cocky brother-in-law paled and fell all over himself to apologize. Before she realized what was happening they were all herded to the heated glass greenhouse, one of her favorite spots, with an ottoman brought over by Greg himself. Trevor looked around while Poppy, Michael and Cody sat, waiting for Greg to return with the others and drinks.

“What in the world do you have over Greg?” she asked Trevor when they were alone.

“I’m not sure.” His amused shrug told her he didn’t hate the VIP treatment. “Although, it’s probably more than his house. I’ve never seen a grown man grovel so hard, so fast.”

“Why would you have his house?” Cody asked before she could.

“A few years ago some of the guys and I raced for pink slips but instead of cars we would bet deeds, property, accounts, businesses, that sort of stuff. I got into it for a while and made some serious bank. Grubby and a couple others send me mad money every month to cover the old debts.” He turned to her and looked stern. “So if he’s a shit to you, Poppy, I want to know.”

“After what happened earlier, I don’t think that will be a problem.” She hoped the new turn of events helped the night go smoother and smiled when she heard the rapid approach of little feet. “Stampede!”

“Auntie Poppy!”

Half a dozen children ranging from five to ten jumped her in a wild barrage of hugs, kisses and shouted stories. Michael and Cody playfully kept them from possibly hurting her while the other adults shook their heads in amusement. The kids tickled her and squealed happily when she laughed loudly.

Even surrounded by children, she could see her men sizing up her sisters. The two present were the oldest of the family, both around forty and they looked good for their ages. Rose, surgically so. It amused Poppy how her sisters often wore similar clothes, today pastel cardigans and khakis along with high heels and tasteful jewelry.

There were honest comparisons to be made. Her older sisters were taller and slimmer than she was. They were perfectly pressed and fresh from the salon while she was in a pair of corduroy pants and a bright pink sweater. She’d even completed the ensemble with the gaudy, plastic ring Cody won for her in a gumball machine in the hotel lobby.

Not long ago she might have felt insecure around her sisters, might have slumped and assumed her date found them more attractive, but not anymore. The looks on her men’s faces when they turned back to her assured her, as far as they were concerned, she was the prettiest woman in the room and the only one who mattered.

“Okay, kids, back to the playroom.” Rose’s announcement wasn’t one Poppy wanted to hear. There was never enough time to spend with her nieces and nephews, but she hadn’t seen them in over a month. “Auntie Poppy will be down to play very soon, I’m sure.”

All but the twin boys ran out of the room, receiving many hair ruffles and head pats as they passed the adults. They might treat her like crap, but her sisters and their husbands raised good kids and they loved them. Both boys still on her lap had shaved heads but one was obviously ill, much thinner and paler, though like his doctor assured her Alexander was on his way to being well.

Greg made introductions while she spoke quietly with the boys, hugging and kissing them. Cody kept the conversation going to Poppy's surprise, as she continued to listen about school plays and basketball camps. After ten minutes she realized he did it so she could have a little more time with the boys.

"Alexander, Jonathan, supper is ready downstairs with Nanny Josie," Rose said. "Dad ordered your favorites."

"Chockie chokes." Jonathan's excitement had him jumping off her lap but not before a last kiss. "Come on, Alex, you can eat chokes."

Alex kissed her cheek as well and ran after his twin. "I can eat it all. The nurse said so."

Michael helped Poppy to her feet after the twins were gone, and they followed her sisters and their husbands to the dining room. Michael made no secret of holding her to his side as they walked, and she knew the brothers noticed the lack of welcome she was given. Ahead of them Rose and Lavender laughed, their arms around each other's waists, but they had yet to acknowledge her.

Poppy was used to it and could go a full holiday without saying more than a dozen words to any one of her sisters, but from the way Cody was scowling and Michael kept her close, she knew they didn't like it.

She'd tried to explain her family several times, but it didn't compute with the brothers. Their mother loved them. Every time they left with her near, she gave them kisses and told them to be careful. Their dads helped them with their cars, played cards and drank beer with them. They always had a friend in their brothers, even if they disagreed.

She couldn't expect them to understand the animosity and disinterest in her family, but the breathing example helped them see what she meant when she said they weren't "close."

"We put on a full southern supper for ya'll." Rose showed them to a large buffet, heavy with true southern fried on the good silver and fine china passed down from their mother. "We didn't have time to cook ourselves, but CaraDees right here in town does a very nice spread. Please, help yourselves, and we can get to know each other better."

Everything on the buffet was golden fried perfect or covered in butter, the kind of meal her boys appreciated, complete with iced bottles of beer at the end and small wine glasses for dessert liquors. Smothered chicken and pork chops, smoked brisket, roasted Brussels sprouts, hush puppies, garlic potatoes, and spinach salad adorned the table. Brownies and pie had their own sideboard.

Halfway through the buffet Michael looked over and frowned at her glazed carrots and roll while his plate was loaded. "Baby, is there anything here that doesn't make you miserable?"

"I suppose this isn't exactly a figure friendly meal." Lavender was second oldest with a sarcastic bend. More often than not it pushed into mean, and the sneer on her face when she looked at Poppy's plate stayed true to character. "But Poppy's never worried about staying slim, have you, honey?"

Trevor's eyes narrowed and Greg jumped in, the sheen of perspiration on his forehead again making her wonder what Trevor held over her brother-in-law. "Ha ha, funny joke. I think Poppy looks great. Remember how big you were, Lavender, when you were pregnant with Wesley? I think you said you gained fifty pounds, but you wouldn't know after the lipo and tummy tuck."

The daggers shot at him might have killed a lesser man but Greg continued, returning his focus to Poppy. "We keep lots of lighter meals in the refrigerator. Chicken breasts and steamed vegetables mostly. Would that be something you could eat, honey?"

"Ah, yes." Unnerved by his solicitous behavior, she looked up and saw her family watching them intently while Trevor grinned and winked at her. "I have peptic ulcers, so any of those things would work fine."

"I'll be right back." Greg all but ran from the dining room.

Five minutes later the Maguire women, Poppy included, watched Greg. His bizarre behavior took the focus off her, which she was grateful for, but seeing him bow and scrape to Trevor, who remained cold, was beyond odd.

"Okay, apparently Greg's been taking his pain pills again," Lavender announced. He'd just set a glass of water in front of Poppy and asked if it had enough ice. Lavender couldn't let it pass unmentioned. "What is this business about security people? What have you gotten yourself into, Poppy?"

"My fault," Trevor said quickly, jumping in before Poppy could explain. "We had some trouble with a drag racer last time we were in town. You know how that can be, right, Greg?"

"Oh, yeah," he immediately agreed. "It can be a rough crowd, which is why I got out when I did."

"I wish I'd gotten out a little sooner so it wouldn't be an issue," Trevor said and smiled apologetically, but she didn't need any more apologies from him, she knew he would never knowingly put her in danger.

"I thought it had to be something like that," Rose said. "I couldn't imagine Poppy warranting that kind of attention on her own."

The men immediately bristled, though Poppy was used to the tiny jabs Rose liked to make. Rose's insults weren't always obvious, but were always painful.

"On to other things. Poppy, is Steven the father of this latest horrible mistake?" Lavender asked. Unlike Rose, Lavender didn't bother to mask her thoughts or outright insults.

"Absolutely not." Poppy was ready for the questions, even if her sister chose to phrase them the crudest way possible. "I haven't seen him since I miscarried almost eight months ago and before we hadn't been together since we made the baby. I'm big, thanks for pointing that out, because we are expecting twins."

"When are they due?" Lavender's husband Peter asked politely, because he was polite. All the husbands were nice and never made her feel she was worthless the way her own blood did. Yet they never interfered either.

"At the end of April," Cody answered proudly, and she couldn't help smiling at him. "Two little girls. Our mother only had boys, so she's excited to have girls in the house. She loves having Poppy close."

"And you are the father?" Poppy braced at what Rose's simple question would start.

"I thought you were with Trevor." Greg frowned.

"No way, I saw her kissing Michael in a very un-brotherly way," Lavender countered. The unlikely conclusion came to each woman who turned toward her with stunned looks. "What have you gotten yourself into? You couldn't make a relationship work with one man, how do you expect to make it work with three brothers?"

"It actually works well." Poppy ignored the barb about Steven and focused on the truth. "But since none of you ever talked to me about your relationships, let alone your sex lives, I'm pretty sure you'll understand why I'm done with this portion of the dinner conversation."

"Shit, that means all three?" Peter whispered, always louder than he thought he was. "Like a devil's three-way?"

"That would be four-way," Michael drawled, and Poppy nearly choked on her water. "It's not for everyone, but it works for us. Poppy said she's done talking about that. Alexander's doctor was very reassuring over the phone. He said since things aren't critical I could do the marrow tests back home and have them sent. Poppy, though, isn't a good match because of a blood type incompatibility."

"Bad luck, huh, Rose?" Peter was a nice enough guy but lacked tact. Poppy knew whatever came next was not going to be well received. "She calls Poppy 'Spare Parts,' ya know, good if you need a kidney."

The group laughed. It was an old joke her sisters had used for years. They'd once discussed why God had given another sister to a family full of girls and when Rose suggested Poppy was for spare parts, they'd all laughed. It wasn't so easy to laugh it off now, not when she knew what it meant to be in a family that actually valued her. "Spare Parts," it could mean so many things, but to her family her individual parts were worth more than the whole.

"Why the fuck is that funny?" Cody slammed his glass to the table. She jumped along with the others. "Is this some fucking game to see who hurts your baby sister the most? She runs halfway across the country to help, putting her health at risk, and the only ones I've seen even remotely care are the kids. What kind of family punishes the baby for something she had nothing to do with? I'm really sorry you lost your mother, but in case no one told you, twenty-five years ago breast cancer killed most of its victims. I think you should honor and love your mother's sacrifice not call her 'Spare Parts.'"

From their expressions, Poppy knew the people around the table, even the other brothers, were as shocked as she was at Cody's outburst. She'd never dreamed Baby Boy had that sort of monolog in him.

"Usually folks storm out after something like that," Lavender said, after a pregnant silence.

"I have to stay and fend you heartless bitches off." He kept surprising her. "But you're right, I'd be fine not seeing any of you again."

More silence. Cody's words hurt, mostly because they were true. Her sisters' silence said more than anything. No half-hearted "but we love Poppy" passed their lips. Just silence. A little part of her died as each sister refused to meet her eyes and their husbands, especially Greg who was nearly ill, looked embarrassed and ashamed.

She wasn't sure what would happen after such a bomb being dropped before dessert, but the worry was taken away when Alex ran into the room, bypassing his parents in favor of her lap.

"Auntie Poppy, I'm tired. Can we rock up in my room like before?" Oblivious to the tension in the room, he hugged close to her.

"Sure, buddy." She looked to her men because she needed the love Alexander offered and couldn't stay without their help.

"No problem, babe, take as much time as you want." Trevor's tone was sweet for her even as he continued to glare at the others. "I'm sure Greg can keep us entertained."

"Of course." Greg jumped to his feet. "I'll show you around the grounds and we'll head to the game room. When you're ready to find us, Poppy, that's where we'll be. Goodnight, buddy. Gentlemen?"

"Hey, little man, how about you let me carry you up to your room?" Michael abandoned the stare down, she knew, because she was more important than making the others squirm. "Auntie Poppy's a little lady, and a big guy like you gets heavy for her."

"Who's he?" Like his uncle, Alexander whispered too loudly.

"He is a very good friend of mine. You can call him Uncle Mike." Poppy cuddled him and wished their family was different. "He's a police officer."

"Really?" Alex perked up and held his arms up to Michael. "Jonathan wants to be a policeman, but Mommy said we can be a banker like Daddy, or we can be doctors like at the hospital."

"And what do you want?" she heard Michael ask, as she led them to the room the twins shared.

"Hmm, not a doctor, that's for sure. I hate the hospital. Maybe a pirate, 'cuz you know, they drive boats."

Poppy was enchanted when Michael engaged him in the pros and cons of being a pirate. When they started discussing booty and cartoon sponges, she let her mind wander.

She wanted to think her family might change one day. Maybe when they were older and their kids were grown they would meet up once a month to have dinner and catch up, but she doubted it. There wasn't a place she was willing to accept within her father's family. The option of begging for their affection and approval held no appeal. She'd been thrilled with scraps before, but now she was too full of love to be content with castoffs.

They passed the living room. It was photo shoot perfect, but Poppy liked Mary's inviting living space better. Thinking of home made her admit the trip wasn't a total loss. Seeing Greg act like a lunatic was amusing. Alex and Jonathan were both doing well, despite the cancer, and the other kids were healthy.

The best part had to be the things she learned about her men. While her sisters and brothers-in-laws aired out dirty laundry and showed their asses, Michael, Trevor and especially Cody hadn't failed her, not even once. They didn't let her hurt any more than they could prevent and Cody—he'd made them look at themselves, and at least some of them hadn't liked what was there.

She didn't feel like she had to worry about their babies. The possibility that they might be teased and tortured over the lifestyles of their parents had been real in her mind. Now, she knew exactly what would happen if anyone made their babies cry. The Paraby brothers didn't take shit from anyone, and they weren't going to allow the ones they loved to be hurt if they could prevent it.

They were going to be wonderful fathers, she thought as she tuned back in to Michael and Alexander, who continued to discuss the benefits of pirateering. They would be the best of daddies, she had no doubt.

Chapter 21

By the time midnight rolled around, they were back in their hotel suite, all three Parabys asleep from too much liquor. In the two hours Poppy spent with her nephews, Greg tried to ensure goodwill with fifty-year-old scotch and to her misfortune, it worked.

Michael and Cody enjoyed a little too much and Trevor, a featherweight with hard liquor, found himself beyond tipsy after only one glass. Greg was near tears of relief when he helped her get them to the car. Lavender's vehicle was gone by then, and Rose hadn't made an appearance. It was best that way. After spending time cozy with the boys, confrontation was the last thing she wanted.

Having Michael and Cody tipsy made for an interesting drive. Both tried to convince her to stop by the Alamo despite the late hour, assuring her they knew how to pick locks if they needed to.

Her men, multitasking.

The bodyguards offered to help her get them to their room, and she gladly accepted. By the time they were to their floor, her three men and the two guards were best buddies. After they checked the room, Cody, Michael and Trevor humming the Jeopardy tune in the hall the whole time, the bodyguards headed home for the night, hotel security more than adequate.

Unfortunately for her, alcohol not only made her men want to break into national landmarks, it also turned off their cocks. She ended her night putting all three to bed and lying beside a snoring Trevor and a dozing Cody, her stomach growling, pussy aching.

"Cody, wake up." She started gently but was rocking him before he responded. "Come on, Baby Boy, wake up."

"Try Mike, baby, my dick's still drunk."

"How late is room service available?" She was willing to eat first and fuck later if she had to.

"Huh? You're hungry?" It took a minute before he finally roused himself. "Where are we again?"

"San Antonio, the Hyatt."

"No room service this late, but the kitchen's open all night." Pushing out of bed, he threw on jeans and Trevor's too small, wrinkled t-shirt while she put on her slippers, completing her penguin covered, flannel ensemble. "You okay other than hungry, sweetheart?"

"I want cream cheese." Her stomach protested over being too long without a meal. "Do you think they have those big soft pretzels?"

"We'll find out." Putting a heavy arm over her shoulders, he led her to the elevator.

Half an hour later, they returned, giggling like kids. Pushing a room service cart over loaded with cold cuts, bagels, cream cheese, strawberries, chocolate ice cream and half a dozen soft pretzels, they whispered nonsense back and forth. She loved drunken Baby Boy. He was playful and charming, and the reserve she always saw in him was gone. Trevor waited at the door in his jeans, buttons undone, the muted lights doing nothing to detract from his deliciously sculpted chest.

"There's my shirt. Ass. Kitchen raid?" He scratched his belly button, and she wondered how he managed to make that sexy. "Anything good?"

"Pretzels." She offered him a salty bit of dough. "They're great with the cheese sauce that Jack, the super chef, made. Oh, and chocolate ice cream. Drunken Baby Boy has a sweet tooth."

"Hey, I'm sober now." The wobble took away any impact from his protest. "Sober enough."

"Really? All parts?" Wiggling her eyebrows she plopped beside Michael, who continued sleeping.

"Finish your snack and I'll show you how sober." Handing her a cream cheese laden bagel, he grinned. "Here you go, darlin'. Eat up, you'll need your strength."

She ate, letting herself be teased by Cody and Trevor while they finished the trays. Cody excused himself to the bathroom, and Trevor rolled out the cart. Left to her own devices, she decided to get a start on her remaining plans. She hadn't bothered with underwear after her shower, so she tossed her pajama top and bottoms aside and turned to the only brother left.

Out like a light, Michael had a difficult time waking, but she pulled the blankets away and wrapped her hand and mouth around his likewise sleeping cock. It didn't take more than three licks to wake him to hard, saluting attention and with no further encouragement she climbed on, sinking her starving pussy over him.

Michael was always up for letting her ride as long as she wanted. His control was amazing, and he had no problem letting her take the lead. Cody and Trevor tended to dominate, not always, but more often than not they took over. She enjoyed it, she really did, but tonight she wasn't in the mood to wait. She was tired but too horny to sleep, and the relief she rode to was paramount for her body and mind.

"Is he even awake?" Climbing into bed, Trevor already had his pants off.

"Awake enough." She batted Cody's hands away when he tried to lift her away from her prize. "I don't want to be teased."

"Okay, baby, what do you want?" Cody's words barely registered as she rocked to orgasm.

She whimpered as the edge of her hunger was fed. Still vibrating with need for more, she reached past Trevor for her travel kit. Inside a mini sex kit waited, complete with a personal vibrator, her shaving razor and several kinds of oil and lubricant. The pretty bottles of scented and warming oils were nice for massage, but it wasn't for those she reached. What she had in mind for them to massage required some serious lubrication.

"Please." She handed a fresh tube of KY to Trevor. "Hard, don't make me wait."

"Yes, ma'am." He kissed her hard on the mouth before moving toward the foot of the bed.

“Michael, sit up some.” Her instructions were moot as Trevor grabbed Michael’s feet and pulled them both to the edge of the bed. Behind her she heard the bottle cap open and saw Cody undressing beside her. She kept Michael inside her as Trevor played lightly between her cheeks with long slick strokes.

She didn’t want the long prep he usually put into getting her ready, and when he pushed a thick finger deep, she knew he’d divined her preference. Almost immediately a second finger joined and began the slow scissoring motion that opened her deeper and drove her crazy. “Cody please, in my mouth. Err, faster, Trevor.”

“Bossy tonight.” Beneath her Michael was more awake and put his hands around her waist. “Makes me hard.”

She might have replied cleverly with something about stating the obvious but Cody eagerly pressed the head of his cock into her mouth. Trevor added a third finger and tapped her butt cheek lightly. Overwhelmed, just as she needed to be, Poppy felt herself coming apart at the seams. She closed her eyes as she continued to fuck, be fucked and suck at once.

She knew Trevor had been waiting for her orgasm before moving forward. As she cried out in pleasure around Cody’s cock, Trevor slipped his fingers free and replaced them with the head of his cock. He was slimmer than the others, but in no way small, so the first surge through her tight band made her gasp. Every time they tried anal the initial pleasure was a surprise, only surpassed by the incredible orgasm she reached when he was deeply imbedded in her body.

Working all three wasn’t something she usually did. It required the right mood, because there was no denying the edge of pain that accompanied the double penetration. She could only handle Michael and Trevor together, Cody’s thicker penis too much for her to take.

From the bottom, Michael shifted and pulled her down to his chest. The new position let Trevor move higher on the bed and take charge. His thrusts pushed her into Michael, who held her tight to take it all. Her face pressed to Michael’s chest, she lost Cody’s cock momentarily. He slipped his thick finger between her lips. She sucked it eagerly, and he moaned almost as loud as she did.

Teamwork, she thought, gasping with every slam that sent her clit to Michael’s pelvis, was a beautiful thing.

Trevor finished first. He pulled out at the last moment, her shoulders suddenly wet with his cum. Michael was right behind, the sudden shift enough for him to have room to push hard and fast. It wasn’t sufficient though, and he flipped her to her back. She held tight through the sudden change, and when the intense thrusts against her g-spot made her come, she screamed. He made no attempt to follow his brother’s example when his moment came. Instead, he surged as deep as he could while his fingers approached bruising on her thighs.

Cody seemed to know she wasn’t done, and pulled his well sucked finger from her mouth. He leaned in close to her ear. “Where do you want me, princess? In your beautiful pussy or hot ass?”

“Ass, ass.” Opening her legs and arms, she pulled him close as he settled between her thighs. “But play with my clit too. Please.”

“Okay, baby.” Moments later the hard nozzle of the lube breached her sensitive pucker, followed by Cody, thicker than Trevor, making her wince but she didn’t want him to stop. With his slippery fingertip on her clit, the discomfort changed to pleasure in a moment. His mouth met hers, kissing her passionately, heavy and hard. “God, I love you so much. I’m not going to last.”

“Harder.” She bit his bottom lip, prompting him to jack hammer inside her, though she knew because of his size, he was careful to keep the intensity just short of pain.

He shifted, staying deep inside as he lifted her feet to his shoulders, giving him a deeper angle. She couldn’t stop the scream of complete joy as he stretched her further, hitting nerves connected with every pleasure point in her body. As she screamed Michael and Trevor took hold of her feet and sucked hard on her big toes. It was small but added another layer Poppy wasn’t sure she could absorb. She spiked into another orgasm, the intensity beyond what she’d hoped, but with her men, it was everything she expected.

She felt tears running down her cheeks, tears of relief, of being beyond overwhelmed in the best possible way. Where she was edgy before, she’d lost all tension in what seemed like moments, but a look to the clock assured her an hour and a half had passed with all four too impassioned to care.

“Come on, beautiful.” Michael lifted her limp, sticky body high to his chest. “You need a nice, long shower before you sleep. Boys, clean up, we’ll be back.”

“I’m hungry again.” The tears still falling were annoying, but she couldn’t stop, wouldn’t stop until they dried themselves up.

“On it, babe.” Trevor grabbed his phone while Cody continued to catch his breath, flat on his back across the bed.

Twenty minutes later, clean, dry and wrapped in several blankets to combat shivering, Poppy sighed. The shakes happened like the hyperventilating. It was almost like her body had difficulty dealing with the pleasure shocks after an intense time in bed, but she knew it wouldn’t last.

Cody held her against his chest, Trevor and Michael on either side in the clean bed, the first too soiled to sleep in. Trevor hated sleeping on towels but also hated sleeping on the wet spot so always booked suites. Trevor fed her bits of fresh muffins readied for the breakfast buffet, brought up by a very well tipped sous chef while she’d showered, and her world was about as good as it could be.

“Need anything else?” Michael asked, holding her limp hand, Cody already dozing with her damp hair against his chest.

“Sleep?” Still hungry, she couldn’t keep her eyes open long enough to eat more.

“Sounds good to me.” Trevor yawned. “We’ll take you out for brunch when we recover from this latest sex coma. Satisfied now?”

“For now,” she allowed, closing her eyes.

“I love that answer.” She knew Michael wore the grin he usually did when especially pleased. The one she loved putting on his handsome face. “Love you, beautiful.”

“I love you.” Trevor’s jaw cracked as he yawned.

“Love you,” Cody said drowsily.

“Thanks guys, I love you all too.”

Chapter 22

“What? No mimosas?” Poppy teased Michael and Cody as they drank Seven-Up and picked at their fruit and Danishes. “They are great here, you know. I think they use grapefruit juice in them.”

Good to his word, Trevor got them a table at a local country club known for amazingly decadent, eight-tiered brunch. Between the twins and the late night romp, she was ready to do justice to each and every food station. Unfortunately for them, the scotch caught up with Cody and Michael, making their stomachs touchy. Trevor kept up, joining her on each trip to the luscious buffet while assuring her it didn’t bother him, if she didn’t mind him packing on empathetic pregnancy pounds.

Once again in maternity wear, gray leggings and luxurious gray cashmere sweater dress with black leather boots, she was completely appropriate for the five-star dining room. In fact, Trevor all but growled at several men who looked too long. It was true what women’s magazines said, a woman having regular sex attracted more men. As a happy woman having great sex Poppy wished she could bottle what she felt for other women. The world would be a much better place if every woman felt as good.

“Just a sec,” Trevor said, pulling out his phone when it vibrated. She hated his phone at meals, but it was business and she was coming to accept it as a necessary evil. He grinned and rubbed his hands together after the short discussion ended. “Awesome news, Van’s visa was revoked and he was just sent back to Japan on the eleven o’clock flight from San An.”

“What about a settlement? Weren’t your lawyers talking to Van’s father about a civil lawsuit if he made a plea-deal with the state department?” Michael asked, though Poppy couldn’t care less about the deal their lawyers had been working on. She only cared that the shooter was out of the country and wouldn’t bother them again.

“They bargained out of court down to, hell what did my lawyer just tell me, assault with a deadly weapon. He pled guilty and gets to do his sentence in Japan. The settlement money was deposited this very morning,” Trevor answered with a grin. “What’s your first extravagant purchase going to be, Poppy, and may I suggest something electronic? There’s nothing like spending loads of cash on something you know will be smaller and better in two years. Makes the purchase sweeter.”

“I’m not even going to think about it. I’m just glad he’s gone. Oh, they brought more berries.” Her previous plate of French toast, sausage and poached pears now only a smear of syrup, she was ready for more. “Be right back, no, stay and keep eating. I need the little girl’s room. I’ll only be a minute.”

“I’ll be back too,” Trevor said, giving her a kiss before turning toward the exit. “I’m going to let Fred and Jack know they can take off.”

The dining room was tastefully packed while maintaining its exclusivity. There were no jeans in sight, instead khakis, tailored suits, and hose covered every leg. Even the younger women wore hose and close toed shoes, propriety still reigning in the matriarchal households of San Antonio society. As a college professor her father didn't have enough clout to get a table, but Greg did, Steven as well, so she knew her way around the fancy shmancy club.

No multi-stalled, sterile bathroom was good enough, instead the toilets were in individual powder rooms within the larger room. The sinks were stocked with thick towels and exclusive toiletries.

She reminded herself to find out their flight time. If there was time Trevor could make a few calls to the salon. She could use a haircut, and his connections were amazing. If anyone could get her pushed to the front of the reservation line it was Middle Man, and he liked when she asked him to do things like that. She could handle a little exclusive treatment if it made him feel good.

The sofas in the parlor area were fussy and over done but fit with the rest of the décor. To top it all off, on the ornate tables mints and fresh pitchers of mimosas waited. The last one made her laugh, though it was almost sad that some tried to replace alcohol in their bloodstream as quickly as they lost it. More than a few women did it every day while they dished about their peers and fashion.

She washed her hands and looked closely at her face. She didn't try to cover her freckles anymore, so she really didn't have much for makeup on, just eye shadow, mascara and a little gloss. She didn't know why she bothered with the gloss, it never lasted long. Cody offered to help if she needed a little color in her cheeks, and at the thought pink tinged them again. A small knock came from the main door as she searched for her gloss, Michael having kissed the last of it off before they'd even made it to the restaurant.

Instead of entering they knocked again. "Yes?"

"Is Eleanor in there?" A husband, she thought and cursed quietly at her missing makeup.

"No, I'm sorry," Poppy called. "I'm the only one in here right now."

She dug into her purse, setting aside tissues and papers hiding her favorite cherry lip gloss. She didn't notice the door open but she did hear it lock, the little "shtick" making her head jerk toward the door and the man standing there. "Steven?"

"Hello, Poppy." Her former fiancé, as tall and dapper as ever, was not the person she expected.

He was a handsome older man, the gray in his short but thick hair distinguishing instead of detracting. His whole demeanor spoke of confidence, nearly arrogance, and made him a good leader as well as a doctor. She'd found him attractive when she thought all successful men were emotionally distant and domineering. Seeing him after having her men, and feeling love, she knew Steven wasn't nearly the man she'd wanted him to be.

"I believe we have something to discuss." He stalked further into the room, bypassing the sofas to stand too close for comfort.

"I really can't think of any conversation I'd like to have with you, let alone in the ladies room." His surprise was evident, but he made no move to unlock the door or leave.

"You told me and your father you miscarried."

"I did. You are not the father of these babies." His focus on the pregnancy didn't shock her. "But I hear you and your wife are expecting. Congratulations."

"The fetus had Down's Syndrome." His condescending tone reminded her of one of the many things she didn't miss about their relationship. "She terminated."

Poppy's gasp filled the room. He looked disinterested, but she couldn't hide her dismay. Sometimes abortions had to happen, she knew that from working in a hospital, but as one whose own mother sacrificed everything to give her life, she knew she would never understand why certain decisions were made.

"So, I am once again pursuing other venues." He closed the small distance between them, her discomfort rising. "You say the baby isn't mine. I say it is. We'll go to my clinic for an amniocentesis and DNA comparison."

"No. These babies aren't yours, Steven. Trevor Patrich is the father." She hoped he recognized Trevor's programming name. It was a stretch, but Trevor ran in many crowds, and she had to make Steven understand someone else was involved.

"That name means nothing to me." His empirical tone put her back teeth on edge and made her look at the door. "You will come with me now. That is my child and you'd be guilty of kidnapping if you leave the state. I demand my right to prove I'm the father."

"You know that's not true. You were there when I miscarried, remember? And no law would ever support you forcing me to prove paternity now. If you want to discuss blood tests after the babies are born, you can contact me through my sisters. Now, let me go." His manicured yet impossibly strong hand clasped around her bicep, fully encircling it with a crushing grip. "You have no rights over me. That stopped when you left me for your ex. You should've kept her baby and loved it."

"You are coming with me now, or I will have you committed." Ignoring her again, he started for the door. "I'm sure your father will agree your behavior lately has been dangerous to yourself and the fetus. Come like a good girl, Poppy."

"No." She reached for her bag and the cellphone she rarely used. "You are acting crazy, Steven, and I'm not going anywhere with you."

He slapped the phone from her hand, the plastic shattering against the tile floor. She stared in disbelief before struggling in earnest. With the same calm he'd slapped her phone away, he smacked her across the face. For all his failings, her father had never once physically hurt her. Tears fell as pain flared along with fear and humiliation. There was anger too, but the composed look in Steven's hard face smothered it with terror.

“Enough.” His warning was cool and shocked her because it was wrong. After the impromptu violence, some kind of reaction should have presented yet he acted as if he’d done nothing out of the ordinary. “We’ll leave through the side door, and you’ll not fuss or I’ll be forced to punish you.”

Shocked, she let him drag her from the restroom, her feet shuffling as he pulled. A momentary lull around the bathrooms meant the hall was empty. He would get her to his car, she thought, as she couldn’t make herself fight through the numbness surrounding her mind. He would get her to his car and do anything he wanted if she didn’t fight. She tried to shake herself from the fog her mind created, recognizing the shock response from working in the emergency room. A person could be fine but if they were shocked and hurt enough, it was hard to break that veil and she despised herself for being so easily pulled.

“Poppy?”

She stumbled to her knees despite Steven’s hold at the sound of Michael’s voice. She screamed at the top of her lungs, trying as she did to crawl from Steven’s grabbing hands. He kept after her for a few moments but she’d broke his grasp and more people came at the sound of her screams, preventing him from latching on to her again.

Pandemonium reigned as everyone tried to figure out what happened. Poppy knew she wasn’t much help, but the relief of being away from him was making other thoughts flee. She found herself in the care of a matronly, older woman, a blanket from the club’s spa wrapped around her to combat the shivering she couldn’t control.

She hated feeling terrorized and wanted to be back between her men where she was safe and only ever felt pleasure, but Michael, Cody and Trevor were across the room. They stayed close enough to reach in only moments, but their conversation with the manager was too quiet to hear and she knew they thought it was best. Hell, it probably was. She couldn’t add anything but crying anyway.

“Lord, look at your eye.” Her protector gently prodded her bruised cheekbone after the tears dried to hiccups. “We need a doctor. Someone hit this poor girl.”

“I am a doctor.” Always calm, always logical, the sound of Steven’s voice made her shiver. “I was attempting to assist her when she behaved in a self-destructive manor.”

“Bullshit.” Discussions were over with Trevor’s less than subtle conclusion.

The manager looked eager to accept any explanation the longtime member gave, but her men were becoming angrier as management continued to stall. Her face throbbed, and when she touched it she winced. She looked up and saw Cody watching her. She didn’t like the look in her usually levelheaded, sweet, cuddly lover. He turned toward Steven and newly familiar with violence, she recognized it in Cody’s expression.

“Call the police and an ambulance now, because if I do this whole place will be so tied up in lawsuits the door will never open again,” Trevor promised.

Cody stalked toward Steven, as Trevor continued to argue.

“Boys,” the older woman comforting Poppy said sternly.

To Poppy's relief, Cody stopped in his tracks at the matron's voice. He looked away from Steven and for the time being, Poppy thought more violence would be avoided.

"The police are on their way, an ambulance as well. Settle down before the police arrive or you'll give them a reason to arrest you. Which one of you belongs to her?"

"I've got her." After one last long glare at his adversary, Cody strode to her side. "I want him out of this room. If he's in my sight I'm going to kick his ass."

"Cody." She had to get to him before he changed his mind and blood flowed.

"I'm here, darlin'." The fighter put away, he gently wrapped his arms around her. "Thank you, ma'am. Do you think you could find some ice for her eye, please?"

When the police arrived the situation stalled again when no one could offer any witness information. Steven maintained his story and insisted Poppy had been self-destructive. That she'd been injured in a small way was unfortunate but far from intentional.

Poppy told an officer what happened, keeping a tight hold on Cody when she relayed the details about being hit and the threats Steven made. The officers looked acutely uncomfortable with the situation, terming it "domestic" since Steven called himself the father of her baby while Michael, taking point with the police, called Steven a damn liar.

"Look." Michael finally stepped in when the officers once more talked among themselves with no decisions. An hour had passed and her eye was painfully swollen shut. "You guys know what a woman's face looks like after she's taken a hit. We all know even if—big old if—that asshole hit her unintentionally, it's still low grade assault. Your job is to take people to jail and let the lawyers deal with the issue from there."

"Sir, I understand you're upset, but I think the best course of action is to separate the parties and allow any legal action to take place in civil courts." The two older officers nodded when the younger explained their decision.

"Okay." Michael's voice was so hard she barely recognized her calming, reasonable lover. "I want names, badge numbers and the name of your supervisor."

An hour later they waited in the airport's private lounge, Poppy still icing her cheek. It was better because she was in Trevor's lap and the Tylenol was kicking in. Cody got snacks while Michael made several phone calls.

She hadn't expected the time in San Antonio to go smoothly, and while she could have anticipated Steven's reaction, she couldn't have predicted his violent behavior. Her men were overreacting and not letting her out of their sight, but she didn't mind. She wouldn't complain about the smothering, at least not for a few weeks.

She wanted to go home. They'd only been away four days and she'd only been in Montana a month before that, but she missed her bed and blankets. She missed Mary's sympathetic ear, Paul's laughter, Thomas's conversation, and Duane's cursing at everything from basketball scores to rabbit poop. The Paraby ranch was her home, and more than anything she wanted to be back where she felt safe and loved.

For all the drama, she'd managed to tie up loose ends while back in her hometown. She'd quit her job with the nursing service. One of her former co-workers called after she put in her notice to ask about her townhouse, so the sale was already being worked out through a realtor.

It was nice seeing her nephews and doing what they could to help Alexander. Though it frightened her, Michael would endure a spinal tap in Missoula to donate if he could. San Antonio would never feel like her home again, and even though she would miss parts, she was sure she could walk away with few regrets.

"Baby, you're zoning out." Kissing the uninjured part of her face, Trevor shifted her closer. "Feeling okay?"

"Just thinking about home." She kissed his palm before setting it over her belly. "Is there any reason ya'll don't have a dog at the ranch?"

"We had one. It was mostly Cody's, but he died about five years ago. We've talked about getting another but haven't gotten around to actually doing it." The slow circles he made on her stomach calmed her more. "Do you want a puppy or something?"

"I suppose ya'll would like a lab or collie or something useful."

"Probably, but I didn't ask what we wanted." He tweaked her nose playfully. "I asked what you had in mind."

"Something white, fluffy and worthless beyond petting, cuddling and shedding."

"Little?" he asked, with an indulgent smile.

Might as well go for broke. "Dust mop sized, preferably."

"I'll talk to a breeder I know in Denver and see if she can recommend a breed that's good with kids." He spoke like it was no hardship to ask three rough and tumble men to house an itty bitty piece of fluff dog.

"Really, you don't mind?" she asked. "Because I'm sure I'd like a lab or collie or anything."

"Babe, a dog's a dog. Baby Boy might have an opinion and Michael gets three kinds of pissed if his boots get chewed on, but I don't care. As long as I can pet it and it's good with kids, the breed doesn't matter."

"I'll try not to let it chew on your shoes, either." Unwelcome tears burned in her eyes. "You're very sweet. Thanks, Trevor."

"Hell, there's gotta' be an easy mark in the family. I'm willing to let that be me." With his pinky he wiped away a tear. "What's this for?"

She shrugged and cuddled into his lap, much of the trip's ugliness eradicated by his simple yet deep love. She should have known they wouldn't let the ugliness last, they never did.

The flight could've been tense, but Michael put his phone down and she happily took its place, wrapping as close as the seats allowed. She whispered sweet words to combat all the frustrating ones he'd been hearing. She made sure he knew how much she appreciated everything he was doing for her and how much he meant to her. It was easy to forget that her strong men needed words of love and reassurance. Words held affection she was happy to share.

The ride home from the airport was spent in Cody's arms in the backseat of Michael's truck. The trees were covered with a new layer of sparkling snow, all dressed up in welcome. When the giant cabin came in sight, complete with ornate Christmas lights sparkling in the yard and on the house, she knew everything would be all right, because she was finally home.

Chapter 23

They tried to stay busy, but it wasn't easy. After the flight Poppy was exhausted, so Duane checked her and ordered her to bed. That was over twenty hours ago, and they waited for her to wake. Duane said to relax and let her sleep. She would get up when she was ready, but the wait was pushing their ability to be patient.

At their doors again, they caught each other checking her for the fifth time but she still slept, cozy beneath her favorite comforter. The water bottle beside her bed was half full so they knew she woke at some point. Cody shrugged and headed back through his room to the kitchen. It was time for lunch, he was hungry, and with Poppy in mind he started chopping vegetables for soup. Michael grabbed beef tips from the refrigerator and brazed them lightly. Trevor hunched over his BlackBerry, keeping busy there, but he would butter the toast later.

"I think we should wake her up," Trevor announced after the meat, broth and vegetables were in the heavy stewpot on the back burner. "It's been too long. She has to be hungry. What if she gets sick from not eating?"

"Dad said she's fine." Michael sounded reasonable, but his gaze continued to stray to the hall. "She had a hard few days, and if she's sleeping she needs it."

Trevor grumbled but didn't pursue, turning back to his phone. The bowl of pretzels passed between them on the kitchen island as they kept their thoughts to themselves. There were things they needed to talk about. San Antonio had been a nightmare of epic proportions, and questions needed to be answered. Letting the situation pass on its own would cause them problems later when the festering made Poppy insecure and sad again. They couldn't fix her family, no matter how much they wanted, but they could listen and hopefully understand her feelings. They could also sue the hell out of the abusive doctor who'd hit her.

"Boys." Paul took an empty stool, Thomas and Duane joining the group, as Cody, Michael and Trevor continued to contemplate silently. "So, our Poppy has some family problems down in San Antonio."

"They are a fucking nightmare." Trevor tossed aside his phone, and Cody stopped it before it slid off the side. "You wouldn't believe these people, Dad. Can you picture how anyone could treat her like shit?"

"A sweet girl like her?" Thomas shook his head and took a handful of pretzels. "It's a shame, a damn shame, if they don't value her like they should."

"We won't make that mistake," Duane assured them. "What the hell is her family thinking to treat her badly? You boys are lucky she's as well adjusted as she is. That sort of emotional abuse and neglect can really wreck a person and make them not want to trust what's right in front of them."

They nodded, quietly thankful for Poppy's self-reliance and strength. It wasn't something just Cody and the others noticed. Everyone who took the time to know her saw how sweet and strong she was.

"I'm already looking into this Dr. Phillips person," Thomas announced. "It's going to be my great pleasure to ruin every aspect of his life that I'm able to. That rat bastard is going to have a horrible new year."

"That knowledge lets me sleep at night," Michael smiled some at his father's promise and Cody was grateful, the eldest hadn't smiled much since San Antonio. "I wanted to kill him when I saw the bruise."

That was a big admission from him. His self-control and even temper were the things that made Michael a good police officer. Cody knew his brother believed in his job as a protector, even if he no longer wore a badge. That his desire to protect the woman he loved had led him to want to hurt another said a lot. Not indulging, said even more.

"I called one of my friends in San An," Trevor admitted, and Cody slid the pretzel bowl to him. "He runs in Dr. Asshole's circles, and he put out the word of what happened before the dick can try to duck and cover. His Christmas social schedule has suddenly dried up. That's something, I guess."

They all nodded again, Trevor's connections enviable. He knew everyone who was anyone, and he never met someone who didn't walk away a friend. Cody had seen his brother drop everything at a phone call to help someone out, and people did the same for him.

"I made her cookies." Cody idly slid a lone pretzel back and forth between his palms on the counter. "When she wakes up, I'm going to put them in the oven so they're warm and gooey like she likes."

He would have killed the man if he hadn't been busy taking care of Poppy. His temper was usually even and he'd learned young to control himself, but seeing the bruise on her face had done away with that discipline. He was glad he'd stopped before anyone else had been hurt.

"Well, boys." Duane sighed and took a deep drink of his Coke. "I wish we could do more with this. We'll do our part so Poppy knows she's welcome here, but most of the healing is going to fall to you three. You can handle it though."

"Yep," Thomas agreed with complete confidence in his tone. "You've got too much to lose to let her run back to her shell. It's going to take some doing, because she's going to be embarrassed about her family. The insecurities are going to sprout up, hormones are going to rage, and the bigger she gets the more she'll wonder if you love her or if it's just sex. It'll be the little things that reassure her once making love is off the table, and with twins that's going to be sooner than later."

“But you’ll manage.” There was no room for doubt in Paul’s words. Cody recognized the pride in his father’s voice. “We’re proud of you boys. You picked a hell of a woman. She’s going to cry and fight you, Mary did every other month, and we did the same. It’s not easy making four personalities mesh, but I speak for all of us when I say we’re proud of you boys and the way you are handling everything.”

“You’re the men we hoped you’d grow into when you were such stupid teenagers,” Thomas added, with a grin.

“Your mother is proud too,” Duane said. “From day one she’s been saying how perfect that girl is for you. Mary did the best she could with you, and she’s sure Poppy will finish the job of keeping you on the straight and narrow.”

The boys, now men though they’d always be boys in their fathers’ eyes, nodded in unison. For Cody, the approval from men he’d learned to be a man from meant a lot. For all of them it meant a lot. They were learning no matter how much they wanted to keep Poppy in a bubble and away from anyone who would hurt her, it wasn’t going to happen.

Ideally, they’d planned for the three of them to protect their woman and always provide for her. Even three wasn’t enough. They were going to have to reach out, and thank God, they had their parents.

It wouldn’t be easy, but their parents had laid the ground work and eventually, Poppy would start the process of making friends and becoming part of the community. The time spent only with them was necessary though, so she understood she always had them. She wrapped them around her little finger, and Cody knew they were right where they wanted to be.

Footsteps in the hall made them turn. From his place at the far end, Cody had to lean back to see the living room. Flushed and soft, Poppy wandered in. The soft blue sweats that were too big at the start of her stay, now fit snug around her middle. The bruise on her face could have been worse, but it still marred her cheek with a swollen smudge of purple.

They watched as she rubbed her eyebrows, not focusing on the kitchen. The fire was lit in the living room and drew her attention. She paused in her stocking feet, braced her hands at the small of her back and stretched, her stomach pushing out more as she gazed at the fire for a long minute. Cody smiled at his brothers as they turned to him and grinned. They recognized her waking up routine. It took a while for her to start processing and in those quiet, soft moments she was the most beautiful person in the world. Paul’s chair squeaked when he shifted, and she turned to the sound.

“Oh.” She straightened and rubbed the side of her stomach, but Cody thought she was too sleepy to be honestly startled. “Hi.”

“Hey there, honey,” Thomas greeted. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” She slowly walked to the kitchen. “Have you ever slept so long you’re sore from not moving?”

“Yep.” Paul chuckled. “After the heart episode I was in bed more than I was accustomed to. I ached more after a day of that, than I did stacking hay.”

"I feel like I ran a marathon." She stood despite the empty stools before her. "Without carb loading."

"You're just starting your marathon," Duane told her. "The more those babies grow and move, the less you're going to be able to sleep, and once they're born...You just take all the sleep you can get now, sweetie. I suppose we'd better get back to Mary. We're supposed to be helping get the damn Christmas decorations set up in the living room."

The dads stood and patted their sons' shoulders as they passed, and Cody was happy to see them stop to hug Poppy too. She was the daughter they hadn't had, and they didn't mind showing her the affection she deserved. Cody went to the stove and stirred the stew, turning the oven on to preheat for the bread. Poppy continued to stand, still fuzzy, but she didn't look upset or discontent, just a little sleepy and thoughtful.

"Everything okay, sweetheart?" Michael asked before Cody could. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Huh? Yeah, I'm fine," she answered. "And I'm not thirsty. Thanks, though. I can't believe I slept that long."

"You were tired." Now that she was awake, Trevor was more accepting of her sleeping so long. "We're sorry. We haven't been taking very good care of you lately, babe. We'll do better."

"You guys do fine." She waved away his apology with a sleepy motion. "So, what's been happening?"

"Nothing, just settling in," Cody answered. "We've talked to Thomas, and he's started working on things in San Antonio. He's already filed for restraining orders and every possible injunction and legal thing he can think of. I hope that's okay."

"Sure, sure." At her absent answer he wasn't sure she was completely awake. "God, it's good to be home. I really like my bed. I like the fireplaces. I like the smells here. I like the chill in the air."

Cody saw his brothers' reaction was like his. Since she was relaxed, they relaxed. Her words were a balm on their nerves and reassured them that even though things had gotten hard in her old home, here in her new one, she was content.

"The lady who bought your townhouse called, and said the moving truck left this morning with all your stuff. It should be here tomorrow or the next day," Trevor told her.

She nodded and finally sat, holding open her hand. Michael grinned as he placed several pretzels in her palm.

"Speaking of calls, my father texted me an hour ago."

They all froze. Her father was a ghost in all the drama, in the shadows but not someone they'd dealt with directly. They didn't know him, but they agreed they didn't like him. Not one damn bit. Any man who refused to tuck in his baby and encouraged abusive relationships belonged under the wheels of a semi tractor.

"And?" Michael asked.

“And I’m not invited to Christmas.” Her giggle was full of genuine humor, not the pain Cody expected to hear. “Peter spilled the beans about our devil’s four way and Dad is thoroughly disappointed in my judgment. If I don’t end the relationship and recant my liar’s tale about Steven, he’ll disown me.”

“And?” Cody felt ill.

“And I hope you guys weren’t kidding when you said you would love me forever, because I officially disowned him first.” Poppy frowned at him as she chewed a pretzel. “I can’t believe you had to ask me that, Baby Boy. You met my sisters. He’s ten times worse than any of them.”

“What a bastard.” Genuinely appalled at what could be worse than the “mercy” he’d seen from her sisters, he shuddered.

“Exactly. I’ve got three men who love me the way I am, who’ve never asked me to change, and made me part of their family. San Antonio can’t touch how much love I have right here in this kitchen, let alone the whole house.”

“Good.” Michael kissed her cheek and handed her more snacks as Cody worked on the stew. “We built this house for you, Poppy. We saved this love for you. It’s only going to grow.”

“I know.” She yawned so big Cody saw her tonsils. “You guys are happy, I like that. I’m going to keep making you as happy as I can. It’s nice to know we can be together and be content, but there is one thing...”

“What’s that, babe?” The most eager to please, Trevor beat Cody to the question.

“I’d like to get married if one of you boys can figure out a way. And I’d like to find a way to include your parents so they can all get married together too.”

“We would all want that, sweetheart,” Michael said gently. “But it’s illegal.”

“Oh, I know it wouldn’t be a legal marriage, but we could have a ceremony, make the promises to each other, right? The most important thing is that we love each other but I’m girl enough to want a wedding and all the fancy stuff, even if it’s just for us. It’ll just feel more official then when I change my name because I want your name.”

“Then it’s yours, darlin’,” Cody promised. “We’ll figure out a way to get everything together so by the time the babies are here you’ll be a Paraby.”

“I’ll make some calls,” Trevor added. “I don’t think it’s too big of a request. How about Christmas? Too soon? It might take a little imagination, but I think we can make it happen.”

“And your parents too. Your mom and dads never had the ceremony they should have. They’ve been together almost thirty-eight years, and I think that should be celebrated. And maybe after New Years, Trevor. I want the dress and you guys in tuxes, and pictures. Mary will want the same, so we’ll need time to do a little planning.”

“You can have whatever you want, sweetheart.” Michael kissed her hand and took the words from Cody’s mouth. “You’re amazing, you know that, Poppy? The past few days were hell on you, I know they were, but here you are planning a wedding for everyone. That’s amazing.”

"Naw, it's just life." She leaned and bumped Michael's shoulder playfully. "I've decided I'm living my life for the people I love. I've got you three, your parents, and you know what? I'm going to make friends here, raise my kids, and be happy."

"Thank God," Cody said. "We were sweating bullets, but we should've known you'd have everything figured out in that brilliant brain of yours."

"Yes, Cody, you should have." He caught the kiss she blew his way and tucked it in his pocket. "It took a long time to get here, but I'm where I want to be, boys, and I'm going to stay."

"You'll stay here with us at the ranch?" Cody asked.

"It's not just the ranch, Baby Boy, not anymore." She looked completely content cuddled to Michael's shoulder. "Now, it's my home."

Epilogue

Two Years Later

“Oh no, stop the dog, stop the dog!”

Poppy watched, holding her sides against splitting laughter as Cody threw a snowball at the mini-golden doodle as the little guy lifted his leg to anoint the snowman version of Michael. Effeminately known as “Heidi,” the dog tripped over his feet and did a summersault before the snowball hit and distracted him, then took off after the babies again. The day dawned snowy, but just warm enough for her and Mary to bundle the active toddlers against the cold. To all of the females’ delight, all three grandpas and one daddy joined as well.

A big black truck pulled into the driveway, Poppy’s excitement matching her daughters’ as it came to a halt. The two daddies absent from making snow angels finally appeared. Deirdre squealed and wiggled out of Duane’s arms. Miranda kicked and screamed until Paul set her on her booted feet. Poppy stayed with the adults and watched as the babies waddled through the snow to their daddies.

Michael was out first, his head covered by the hat Poppy had knitted him for Christmas. He scooped up his girls and kissed them as they giggled. She couldn’t blame them, his kisses made her giggle too, even if in an entirely different way. The main event came when Trevor rounded the truck, arms full of beautifully wrapped gifts.

He’d been in LA promoting his latest game. The long awaited blockbuster had been put on hold while he’d taken “paternity hiatus,” as he called the past eighteen months spent being the Mr. side of her Mom. She’d never felt outnumbered with her babies because Trevor never let her. From the very first day the girls came home, so tiny and needy, he’d been in the trenches, changing sheets at three AM, warming bottles, changing diapers and organizing the other men in rotation to make sure she was never alone.

For the first six months the added help had been essential, because the girls didn’t sleep for more than twenty minutes at a time. Then teething started, Dee developed croup and Da had done the same out of sympathy for her twin. She didn’t know how other women with sickly twins managed on their own or with even one husband. It had taken a full year for the twins to sleep through the night and that was when Trevor went back to programming.

She hadn’t suddenly been left alone. Cody and Michael, who always helped, picked up where Trevor left off. They made sure household things were spread between them so nothing fell too heavily on one person, especially her.

Not only were they a family, they were a well oiled machine of poopie diapers, sippy cups, and laundry loads. Together, no task was too hard, no walk too long because when she was tired, one of her husbands took over so she could rest and when they were all too tired, grandma and grandpas sent them to bed.

They were to the fun part now. The girls were happy and healthy and incredibly beautiful. The sleepless nights were distant enough she missed having someone itty bitty in her arms. She loved the toddler stage, but she knew before long their family would need more.

It made her sad that her family was missing all of the wonderful parts, but aside from birth announcements she'd had no contact with any of her sisters, let alone her father. It was their loss. She knew Alex's cancer was in remission from one of the social networks over the internet. Her oldest nieces both had pages and kept her in the loop. They hadn't needed Michael's marrow in the end, the chemo enough to put the cancer to rest, but the offer had never been taken off the table. After everything her sisters said and did, she would never take out her frustrations on their children.

"Daddy." The girls kissed and squealed as Trevor and Michael both reciprocated.

Finally, Trevor looked over at her and the familiar jolt was there. Ten days was a long time, longer than any of them had been apart since their marriage, and she could see the video chats, phone calls, and texts hadn't lied. He'd missed her. He handed off Da and Poppy ran to him, launching into his open arms as Michael hustled the babies aside to give them some privacy.

"I missed you." She kissed his face all over just as their daughters had moments before. "Two weeks is too long."

"You have no fucking idea how much I missed you." He held her too tight, but she didn't care.

They kissed and cuddled, and she laughed when he rolled her in the snow. The girls joined in, and before long a snow fight erupted and Mary was calling them inside for coco.

"Coco." Abandoning the snowball fight, Dee grabbed hold of Michael's hand. "Coco? Cookie?"

Da was beside Poppy, tugging on her hand to help her up. "Mommy, coco. Cookie?"

Her babies, always working two fronts, she thought with a smile. They were no dummies and their chubby, pinchable cheeks and sweet personalities got them just about anything they wanted. Including coco and cookies on afternoons they played in the snow.

After they'd opened gifts from Trevor and had a messy supper, she let Trevor take over the bath and bedtime ritual. He was good at it, and the little girls had missed him. The video phone was nice, but having Daddy in person to do all the voices in their bedtime story was better.

Enjoying a quiet evening in front of the fire with a book, she looked up when Trevor's stomping came from the hall. There was no subtlety in him and she didn't expect it, not after ten days and excruciatingly long nights without him. Michael and Cody kept her busy but just like if

either of them were absent, she'd felt like part of her was missing. There were a few sore feelings until she'd explained and promised Cody she would pout and mope when he went on his cattle buying trip to Ireland without her in a month.

Trevor slouched into a chair, blowing out an exaggerated breath. Above him their wedding photo hung on the wall. All three men held her, their hands on her belly over her white gown. It had been a beautiful day, fresh snow the night before covering the ranch in a sparkling coat. Some choice people had attended—SaraJean from the creamery, Ayden and Harper, and a spiritual advisor Trevor found among his contacts.

Had it been the white church wedding she'd pictured as a girl? No, but it had been beautiful in its own right, and beside the wedding photo was a picture of Mary, Thomas, Duane, and Paul on the same day, all dressed in their finest and smiling. Dee and Da were also shown, the stages of their lives so far diagramed in photos. It was her favorite wall, and with her men surrounding her, there was no place else she could ever want to be.

"Fuck a duck." Trevor effectively took her out of her musings. "It's good to be home. Those two monkeys got bigger while I was gone, didn't they?"

"Yep," she replied. "At least seven pounds apiece."

"And they got their PhD's in anthropology." Michael smirked, more easy going after two years in her company, a change she took great pride in. "It was only ten days, Trevor. Think about when you do your promotion tour next month."

"Nope." He shook his head. "Not doing it. I already told them, no fucking way am I going to be away from my wife and kids for six weeks. They can get a cardboard cutout of me, and that'll have to work."

"Oh, Trevor, it'll be okay." She'd been dreading the trip, but she understood that he needed to do what he enjoyed. "You can go, we'll be fine."

"I won't be." Her heart clenched at the intensity she saw when his dark eyes locked on her. "I'm not fine without you and the girls. I told them in a few years, when the girls are bigger and can travel with us, I'll consider a tour. I'll program and do stuff from here, and weekend things once in a while, but if they try to press for a full promo tour, I'm telling them to fuck squirrels."

"The poor squirrels." She laughed and set her book aside.

Trevor adjusted in the chair and patted his lap. She didn't move. He crooked his finger, telling her with the motion and his eyes to "come here." She stayed where she was.

"What the hell, babe? I don't even know why you're still dressed at this point. Another four seconds and that shirt's going to be ripped off. Isn't that my shirt anyway?"

"I missed you, so I stole it." She shrugged, not feeling at all guilty because he didn't mind. "The girls liked their baby dolls." The plans she had in mind for the night required distraction.

"Yeah." He took the bait. "The guy at the toy store was pissed by the time I found the dolls I wanted, but they had to be blondes, with green eyes and freckles. None of the other ones looked right. They're sleeping with them right now. Da didn't even throw hers out of her crib. Now, are you coming over here or am I going to you?"

"Did I get a present?" Poppy asked innocently.

"I already gave you the necklace. You know, the one that matches the ring I gave you two years ago?"

"You mean the ring I gave her," Cody countered.

"Ha, I have the paperwork that proves I gave it to her," Michael finished, just like he always did when it came to her ring. She'd married them all with her heart in a Valentine's Day ceremony before the girls were born, but according to the law, she'd married Michael. His pension and insurance through his police force retirement plan didn't pay to girlfriends and though it wasn't a lot and made no difference to Poppy, it was a matter of pride for Michael to be able to provide for her and the babies.

The ring she wore was a symbol from all three men. A flashy, perfect diamond from Trevor. Michael added a sapphire to match her eyes, and Cody, her thoughtful man, had chosen an aquamarine stone. Trevor joked about Cody getting a stone to match his eyes, but it was really the babies' birthstone.

Trevor sighed theatrically, and she knew he'd spotted her game. They always knew when she was hinting at something. "What the hell else was I supposed to get you? What does she want, boys?"

Michael and Cody looked at each other, at Trevor, then at her. She did her best to keep her expression innocent, but they could read her like an open book. Emotions were always on her face, but this time the secret was specific so while something showed, she was confident they wouldn't know it until she spilled.

"Do you know, Cody?" Trevor demanded, Baby Boy looking awful thoughtful over in his corner across the coffee table from her.

"Maybe." The way he watched her made her wonder if he already knew. He was uncanny in the way he read her at times. "Come sit on my lap, darlin', and we'll pretend I'm Santa. You know I won't tell you 'no.'"

"My lap," Trevor demanded. "Fuck you, Cody. I've been gone two weeks."

She stood and led Trevor to sit on the couch between Cody and Michael, then straddled his lap, touching all three but didn't say anything for a long moment.

"Honey, we're just teasing." Her silence apparently made Trevor nervous and he rushed in with reassurances. "If there's something you need, anything you want, or want to do, you know we'll do whatever we can to make it happen. There is very little you need permission for. Hell,

permission isn't even the right word. You're a grown woman, and if there's something you want you have our support. Do you want your bathroom done? We ran into Ayden in town, and he said something about it."

"Nope, not my bathroom, although that would be nice." She kissed each one before leaning back. "I want another baby."

The three men groaned in unison but she'd expected them to. The pregnancy had gone very well all things considered, but she knew the delivery hadn't only been difficult for her. It rained six inches the night before her water broke, so the ride to town had been harried and dangerous. Then, when they arrived, the babies, who only days before were head down, ready for a natural birth, turned breech.

Duane decided on a C-section, during which Cody passed out. Minor infections set in after, but by the babies' first month of life she was back on her feet and healthy. The brothers had a hard time remembering the "everything was eventually fine" part.

"Sweetie." Clearly gearing up to dissuade her, Michael put his hand on her thigh.

"Nope, it's the right time. I talked to Duane this morning, he said I'm in perfect shape to have another baby," she broke in. "By the time the new baby gets here Dee and Da will be potty trained and sleeping in toddler beds. Mary said she'd help. Apparently, twin girls are nothing compared to trying to teach you three to drown cheerios. Thomas said he doesn't mind moving his storage room upstairs so we can use it for another bedroom. Paul said—"

"Shit, you talked to everyone else first?" Trevor demanded.

"Just anticipating the arguments."

"Did you know?" Michael asked Cody.

"I figured. Paul was giving me grief the other day about saving my strength, getting enough protein, that kind of stuff. Actually, I thought she might already be pregnant." He raised his eyebrow in silent question.

"Duane just removed my IUD today." She crossed her heart with her finger in promise. "So unless ya'll are up for abstinence or have super strength condoms, I'm open for baby business."

"When have condoms worked for us with you?" Trevor rolled his eyes. "Do we even have any?"

"Mom and Dads probably do," Michael said. She frowned, not foreseeing they would consider that route. "It's been a while since I had to bum a condom from one of them. I wonder if Thomas would still lecture me on a man's duty to a woman's pleasure."

"It's not worth the chance." Cody lifted her off Trevor's lap to his own. "I'm on for another baby if you want, darlin'. We make beautiful babies."

"Fuck you, Baby Boy." Trevor lifted her back. "We make beautiful babies, babe, and a big family works for me, you know that. I'll give you all the babies you want."

"No, fuck both of you." Michael stood with her wrapped in his arms. "They're all talk. Let's get started. Dee and Da need a 'La.'"

“Yeah, Lola.” Trevor jumped to follow, Cody hot on his heels as she tried unsuccessfully to bite back her satisfied grin.

“Or Larissa,” Cody added.

“I’m thinking we’d better stick with girls too.” She held tight to Michael as she smiled at Trevor and Cody over his shoulder. “I don’t think the world can handle more Paraby brothers.”

About Stephanie Beck

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No one was surprised when Stephanie Beck said she was going to write a novel. They were, however, quite shocked when they read the first draft of *Poppy's Passions*. Who'd have thought such naughty things ran in quiet, sweet, unassuming Steph's mind? She loves to make lifestyle reading real and nothing does that like adding family. Anyone can have a hot affair smooshed between sexy brothers, but throwing in parents and family issues most people face made *Poppy's Passions* much more fun to write. With multiple worlds full of naughty-good fun running amuck in her brain, much more is to come from Stephanie Beck.

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