

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

MARI
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Rekindled

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

Rekindled

Mari Carr

Rekindled is a standalone sequel to Spitfire.

It's been a year since her husband's passing, and running the ranch is taking its toll on Claire Hutchins. Independent as the day is long, she concedes the need for help. She wants a foreman, an employee to run the day-to-day who can handle a woman calling the shots. Someone who won't give her any trouble...

Who shows up at her door, first in line for the job? Jeb Carter. Ex-high-school sweetheart. Longtime rodeo star. And the one man capable of making Claire's lust burn out of control...of making her surrender completely.

Trouble has finally come calling...and he's as irresistible as ever.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Rekindled

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REKINDLED

Mari Carr

Dedication

This story is dedicated to that ebook addict, T. A wonderful reviewer and an even better friend. Thanks for the title suggestion.

Chapter One

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in." Claire Hutchins stood behind the screen door and prayed the man standing on her front porch couldn't hear the sudden pounding of her heart.

"You gonna let me in, Claire-bear?" Jeb Carter's grin was still as lethal as it had been in high school.

"I'm thirty-two years old, Jeb. Don't you think it's time you dropped that childish nickname?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I like it."

"Well, I don't. What are doing here?"

"Rumor has it you're looking for a ranch foreman. I thought I'd come throw my hat in the ring."

Claire laughed out loud. "You?"

She could tell he wasn't happy with her laughter, but she couldn't help it. Jeb Carter was a rodeo man through and through. Everybody knew that. He'd wither up and die doing something as boring as ranch work. "Go back to the rodeo, cowboy. I'm too busy for your jokes."

"Unlatch the screen door and invite me in. Interview me."

She fought back the anger—and arousal—that accompanied his demanding tone. It had always been this way. She was an independent, self-reliant woman in every aspect of her life. Then Jeb showed up and she was melting like chocolate in his hands, her body rejecting her brain in its attempt to obey his every command.

"No." She was proud of the strength she'd managed to convey with that one syllable. "I'm not wasting my time. I need a foreman, Jeb. That means I'm looking for someone to stick around for the long haul. Not until the next rodeo season starts up."

"I'm not going back."

With those words, Claire wondered if her life hadn't just flashed before her eyes. "You're not?"

He shook his head. "I'm getting too old to ride bulls. I think it's high time I come home, settle down."

She swallowed heavily, the words *settle down* hovering between them. "I'm sure Liv and Rem would love to have you work for them on their ranch."

"Open the damn door, Claire. I'm not gonna have this conversation through the screen."

She unlatched the door and took a step back as he entered. His hair was shorter than it had been in high school, though still just as black, and his dark brown gaze pierced her as he entered her home. His size had always overwhelmed her. She'd considered that feeling many times in the past. She'd never felt intimidated by him, just, well...overwhelmed really was the only word for it. He was large, tall and brawny—a far cry from her late husband's stature. Bob had actually been a couple of inches shorter than her, and while he'd been strong, he'd looked quite slim and slight compared to Jeb's well-honed, defined, muscular build.

The thought of Bobby pierced her heart. He'd been dead just over a year, and not a day passed that she didn't miss him. He'd been the most patient, gentle soul on earth and a wonderful husband. Bob had also been the polar opposite of the man standing in front of her.

"That's better." Jeb was standing too close but she refused to move away, refused to give him the upper hand in any way.

"For who?"

"Are you angry with me, Claire-bear?"

She considered her short, terse tone. She wasn't sure why she was treating him with such disdain. He'd never done anything to harm or hurt her. Nothing except leave her insides trembling with needs and desires she didn't understand any better now than she had at eighteen.

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "No, Jeb," she said, softening her voice and her demeanor. "I'm not mad at you."

"Good. Then hire me."

She laughed at his absurd comment. It was so like him. Jeb lived life like a bull in rut—charging in and taking control as if he had every right.

"No. I told you, I need someone who'll stick around, someone who understands how to run a ranch."

"Claire, for chrissake, I grew up on a ranch. I may have rejected the lessons and the lifestyle for a while, but I'm not thick. I know how to run a ranch. And I meant what I said earlier—I'm staying. It's time."

She fought back the instinct to shiver at Jeb's comments. She could read between the lines. "I'm not ready."

"It's been a year. I know you're grieving your husband, but dammit, I can't risk you moving on without me. I made the mistake of giving up on us once. I won't do it again."

She closed her eyes, turned away. She couldn't face him or the memories, the years spent wondering *what if*. "That was a long time ago. I've grown up, changed."

"I'm banking on that."

She faced him, eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"When we dated in high school, you were too young, too innocent to handle what I wanted. I know that. You're a woman now. My woman."

"No, I'm not."

"You've been mine since the day you gave me your virginity. I let you slip away once. I've been a patient man. Stayed away these last ten years while you lived your life with Hutchins. I didn't make waves, didn't interfere."

"I'm supposed to believe you traveled with the rodeo not because you loved every minute of it, but because you were avoiding me? Bullshit."

"I love the rodeo. And you're right, I wasn't suffering riding the circuit, but by God, I suffered every time I came home. Every time I saw you with Hutchins, every time I thought of him sharing your bed at night."

"Stop." She put her hand up, anxious to wave away his words. "You and I broke up. We were never right together. You've got to—"

Jeb took a step closer and this time she did move back. "We were right. It's the timing that was wrong. That's not a problem now."

"I can't give you what you want."

He grinned, running the back of his hand along her cheek. "You're the *only* woman who can give me what I want. It's always been you, Claire."

He bent forward, his intention to kiss her as clear as the Texas sky. "Please don't," she whispered when his lips were a hairsbreadth away from her.

He paused for a moment but didn't retreat. "I've missed you."

She closed her eyes and gave in. She'd missed him too. Terribly. She closed the miniscule inch left between them and offered her lips. The moment they touched his, she was transported to the first time he'd kissed her—the night of the homecoming football game. She'd been sixteen and she remembered how excited she'd been when Jeb asked her to be his date for the dance the following night. He'd kissed her beside the bonfire at the end of the game.

Her first kiss, and it was every bit as beautiful as the one he was giving her now, and she felt all those old feelings rekindled. His lips lightly grazed hers, reawakening feelings she thought had died with her husband. Soon his kiss became hungrier, hotter. She reached up, gripping his neck, making her own demands as she pulled him closer. He rasped his tongue against her lips and she opened her mouth, welcoming him in. His grip on her waist tightened and she sucked in a breath as his hands began moving upward, not stopping until he cupped her breasts.

The kiss continued as Jeb tweaked her nipples through her T-shirt. She spread her legs and began rubbing herself against his thigh. Her body was on fire. It had been so damn long since she felt the slightest spark of desire. She'd have to change her panties at the end of this interlude. She was too wet, too needy.

One of his hands left her breast, rising to grasp her ponytail. She shuddered when he pulled her head back, directing her with slight tugs on her hair, nipping her neck.

"It's still there. Still the same," he whispered against her skin. It had always been this way between them. One kiss and it was as if the entire world had gone up in flames. She struggled to pull away.

"No," she whispered. He hesitated and she could sense him taking stock, trying to decide if she really meant her refusal. She batted down her lashes and pushed against his chest. "No." Her voice was stronger this time. "This isn't the time or place." She glanced out into the

yard, relieved none of the ranch hands had walked by and caught her making out with Jeb Carter in the doorway.

She was just so damn tired. It had weakened her resistance. Next time he tried to kiss her, she would be prepared, stronger, better able to fight him off.

"You've got dark circles under your eyes." He studied her face and she knew he wasn't discouraged by her pushing him away. If anything, giving in to his kisses had likely fueled his intentions to claim her...by any means necessary.

She shrugged. "It's been a long month. Hell, a long year."

He grasped her cheeks in his large palms but made no move to draw her closer. "You're gonna hire me."

He was relentless. She chuckled, then conceded. She needed help. "Maybe."

The grin he offered in reply was cocky, smug, and she knew she'd lost this round. Jeb would get his way. "My duffel bag is in the car. Make room for my stuff in your closet."

She narrowed her eyes. "You'll stay in the foreman's cabin and my bedroom door will be locked—every night."

"Maybe." He walked back to his car and she wondered what the hell she'd just unleashed.

Chapter Two

Claire pulled a tray of cookies from the oven, wishing for the thousandth time she could find a decent cook. Slaving in the kitchen all day, cooking for eight men, was not her idea of a good time. Unfortunately her previous ranch foreman had been married to the cook.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilkerson had worked for her husband's family for nearly thirty years and they'd been a godsend to her after Bobby's death. They'd planned to retire months ago but had stayed on, helping her get her bearings as she dealt with her husband's untimely passing.

Several weeks earlier, she'd convinced them to live their dream and move to Florida. She'd foolishly thought finding replacements for them would be easier than it had been. She'd hired a new foreman, Rafe, before they left, and she'd assured Mrs. Wilkerson a cook wouldn't be far behind.

Rafe, however, had been a terrible man, verbally abusive toward the other hands, and she'd fired him after only two weeks on the job. Taking over that role as well had left her precious little time to hire anyone else and she'd tried to hold down the fort, running the ranch and cooking the meals – working eighteen-hour days just to keep up.

She had to admit, hiring Jeb had been the smartest and *stupidest* thing she'd ever done. He'd grown up in the area, so most of her ranch hands already knew him. They'd accepted him as their boss with very few questions asked.

Because of his success on the circuit, Jeb was also a bit of a local celebrity, which meant a few of her younger employees were eyeing him with not just respect, but hero-worship as well. Jeb got a kick out of teasing her with that fame, telling stories of his days with the rodeo at dinner each night while the other hands hung on his every word. She grinned at his shameless attempts to impress her and she wished to hell they hadn't worked, but they had. She was as enthralled by his rodeo tales as the men were.

Regardless of his lack of experience, he did indeed know his way around a ranch and he'd taken to the role of foreman like a fish to water. His decisions were sound, he learned quickly

and he was a hard worker. He'd taken a huge load off her shoulders, and for that she was grateful.

He'd also staked some sort of claim on *her*—and he made sure everyone knew it. They'd gone into town two days earlier to pick up some supplies and Jeb kept his arm draped around her waist during the entire excursion. No matter how many times she tried to step away from him, he somehow managed to keep her close. The gossip had spread through the town like wildfire that Jeb and Claire—the high-school sweethearts—were back together.

"Let me help you with that." Jeb reached from behind her to take the plate of cookies out of her hands.

"I can carry them." She knew she sounded petulant, but the man seemed hell-bent on coddling her.

He kissed her on the cheek and ignored her as usual, taking the plate. "Dinner was damn tasty and these cookies smell too good to share with those yahoos. What do you say you and I sneak out back and eat them all ourselves?"

She laughed. "There are three batches on that plate."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. There's really not enough here for you too. I suppose I could spare a couple, but no more than two."

"Dining room." She pointed toward the other room before picking up the coffeepot and snatching a cookie off the plate. She'd learned that on a ranch, she needed to grab fast if she wanted to eat. Jeb's arrival with dessert proved that point as he was met with loud cheers.

The after-dinner conversation was always her favorite time of the day and she smiled as she watched Jeb interact with the other men. There was an instant camaraderie between them all that had made the last two weeks so much easier than the weeks preceding.

She listened as Jeb wove jokes and friendly conversation in with the list of chores awaiting them all the next day. While Bob had been exceedingly kind and patient, he'd also been far too serious, rarely laughing. She was struck once again by the innate differences between her late husband and the man who now sat in his chair, marveled at her attraction to two men who were so very dissimilar.

"There are some problems with the fencing over on the east field," Jeb said. "We'll have to repair it before we can move the cattle."

She stretched her stiff neck slowly and tried to stifle a yawn, but Jeb's gaze narrowed on hers and, as always, he saw right through her, clearly recognizing her exhaustion.

"All right. Back to the bunkhouse." Jeb stood and the men followed suit. As she said goodnight, she mentally made a list of the chores left to do before she could fall into her bed.

She started carrying the dessert dishes to the kitchen, surprised to find Jeb behind her with the empty coffeepot and two cups.

"I can take care of this." She took the cups from his hands and loaded them in the dishwasher.

"I'll help."

She nodded, wishing her traitorous body wouldn't react so violently to his proximity. Her nipples were starting to protrude behind her T-shirt and just the thought of being alone with him had her pussy going damp. For two weeks she'd held him at bay, and for the most part Jeb had respected that distance and the limits she'd set. He'd stolen the occasional kiss, and more than a few times he'd grasped her hand to hold.

But, overall, he was wooing her slowly, letting her get to know him again, and while her mind appreciated that fact, her body was about to go on a sex-starved rampage.

She walked to the sink, careful to keep her back to him. Scrubbing a pan, she left the chore of wiping up the counters to him. For several moments they worked silently, tidying up the kitchen.

She stiffened when he walked up behind her, his chest far too close to her back. His hands came up to grasp her waist.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Enjoying the show." She glanced up at his comment and caught sight of the two of them reflected in the kitchen window. So much for hiding her body's reaction. Her face was flushed, her breathing harsh and her nipples were erect and practically screaming, *Here I am*.

"God, I love your tits, Claire-bear."

She scowled. "What's the matter, Jeb? Couldn't think of anything chauvinistic to say?"

Her tone dripped sarcasm but he didn't take offense and she watched his grin grow bigger through his reflection. "I stand corrected. I love your *big* tits." As he spoke he cupped her

breasts, roughly kneading the sensitive globes. She resisted the urge to lean against his chest and let him have his way with her. She reached up, gripping his wrists to pull his hands away.

He shook his head. "Put your hands back on the counter."

She froze for a moment, considering the commanding tone in his voice. It was the same one that had haunted her dreams for a dozen years. She'd grown complacent the past two weeks, assuming Jeb would continue his slow assault on her senses. Now, with a few words and touches, she knew the sand in that particular hourglass had run out. He was pressing his suit—Jeb-style.

"I won't ask again," he repeated when she failed to comply. "Put your hands on the counter."

The same war she'd waged against herself years earlier began again. Her body was begging to obey, to jump through any hoop he set before her, while her head insisted giving anything to this man would be dangerous to her heart.

"You still think too much, darlin'." He reached behind her and untied the apron that hung at her waist. "How 'bout I make it easy for you this first time?"

She wasn't sure what he was talking about until he quickly grabbed her wrists, tying them securely behind her back with the apron strings.

"Jesus," she muttered, struggling to free her hands.

"I was hard to beat in the tie-down roping competitions," he joked, kissing her lightly on her cheek.

"Untie me."

He shook his head. "No."

"Dammit, Jeb. Untie me right now."

He turned her until she was facing him and pushed her back against the sink. She gripped the edge of the counter for support as he shoved her T-shirt above her breasts.

"Now where was I?" He roughly pulled her bra down, the tight, lacy material thrusting her breasts and nipples out. "Oh yeah. I was admiring the view."

She gritted her teeth against his sensual assault when his lips landed on her areola, sucking and biting until she was crying out for more. Past experience had proven he wasn't an easy

lover. The gentleness she saw in him during their day-to-day activities would definitely melt away when it came to sex. It was one of the reasons she'd broken off their relationship when they were younger. His needs were too intense, too frightening. Not in the sense that she was afraid of being hurt, but more because her desires ran along the same lines and it scared her. How much would she surrender to him?

"God, Jeb," she moaned when he sucked her nipple into his mouth. She wanted the use of her hands, wanted to be able to hold him to her, keep him latched to her all night long.

No, she thought. No. This was wrong. She was letting him take her over again. Letting him control her.

"Stop."

As quickly as that, he moved away. He stood in front of her and she didn't like what she saw on his face. Pure, naked, unleashed need. He wouldn't be denied any longer.

"No." He reached up to hold her face in his hands, forcing her to meet his gaze. "I'm not stopping, Claire, and I'm not holding back. You want this as much as I do. Don't pretend otherwise."

She swallowed heavily and knew the lie lodged in her throat wouldn't come out this time. She *did* want him. Wanted him with a passion that threatened to consume her until she was reduced to ash. She closed her eyes, unable to look into his chocolate brown gaze. "I do want you," she whispered.

"Open your eyes. Open them and say that again. I wanna make sure you know who you're talking to, who you're inviting to your bed."

She opened her eyes, narrowing them in response to his smug demand. "I know full well who I'm talking to, Jeb Carter. You've made no secret about the fact you want me, so what are you going to do about it?" Her words were laced with challenge.

She was tired of mourning, of waking up alone and sad. And she was tired of pretending she didn't understand what Jeb wanted from her. She knew all too well what he would expect and she knew she'd give it to him. Her resistance was shot.

He grinned wickedly at her dare, and for a second she wondered if she'd pushed him too far.

Fuck it, she thought, and she smiled back.

Jeb tweaked her nipple with his forefinger and thumb, just a quick, firm pinch to remind her who was in charge. Then he took another step back and looked at her, his gaze traveling the length of her body. "You sure are one long, cool drink of water," he drawled, and she laughed.

"Is that your nice way of saying I'm still too tall and skinny?"

He shook his head. "I like your height. You fit me."

He was the only one she'd ever fit. She'd always hated her cursed height. While six feet wasn't a bad thing on a man, it had made her a bit of a freak in high school, a time and place where no one ever wants to stand out as being different. She'd had Bob by two inches barefoot, though her husband never seemed to mind looking up at his wife.

And while she and Jeb didn't see exactly eye to eye, she was definitely the one looking upward in this relationship. Jeb was six foot five and pushing two hundred and fifty pounds of pure muscle. He actually made her feel small. The same had held true in high school and, if she was perfectly honest, she knew that was part of his initial appeal for her, part of the reason she'd succumbed to her first true teenage crush. Then he'd talked to her at homecoming and the crush had turned to full-fledged first love.

"Are you going to stand there staring all night? I have to admit I remember a bit more action from you when we were younger." She wasn't sure where she was finding the nerve to taunt Jeb so. In high school she'd been inexperienced and shy, perfectly willing to let him rule their relationship.

Part of her reason for resisting him so long had been the independent streak a mile wide that had woven itself through her body with the passing of time. She wasn't a pushover and she wasn't exactly submissive. All the more reason she should have kept her mouth shut about wanting him.

He placed his hand on her cheek. "Been waiting for this moment for a lot of years, darlin'. I intend to take my time, do it right."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not some skittish virgin anymore, Jeb. I don't need the kid gloves."

He narrowed his eyes. "I know damn well what you need, Claire. Don't think for a second I don't."

He placed his hands on her hips and pulled her lower body toward his, pressing his denim-covered cock against her, letting her feel his erection. She licked her lips at the prospect of having all that rock-hard flesh filling her once again.

"You gave your virginity to me. I was your first lover and, if I'm not mistaken, I was your first act of true independence."

"What do you mean?" She was confused by his comment, by his willingness to forgo the sex she was clearly offering to reminisce.

"When you broke things off with me, I saw the woman you were becoming for the first time."

She snorted. "I don't really think you saw anything that night. You were pissed as shit. You stalked away and punched a dent in the side of your truck."

He shrugged, his face rueful. "Broke two knuckles. But after a few years I calmed down and realized you were right."

"A few years?" she asked with a smile.

"You were a hard woman to get over."

His words touched her heart and she felt the same stirrings she'd felt all those years ago. The same yearnings and feelings of fondness she'd locked tightly away during the years of her marriage. She cleared her throat, struggling to find some safe response that wouldn't give her away. "Have to admit I like the sound of that *you were right* comment. You mind saying that again, so I can soak it in properly?"

Jeb reached around and playfully tugged her ponytail. "Just like a woman. Figures that would be the one part of my heartfelt confession you'd latch on to."

Her grin grew. "I heard the rest too."

Jeb's face sobered as he spoke. "You'd have hated the rodeo and I would have hated ranch life back then. Too much wanderlust inside me. It was just as you said—we both had some growing up to do."

"And now we're grown up, so I'd like to suggest you either get the lead out and fuck me or untie me so I can finish the dishes."

Jeb reached around her back and released the apron strings. Her heart crashed at his action. He'd changed his mind. Before she could let the pain of that thought sink in, Jeb dropped the

apron and reached for the hem of her shirt. He had her shirt and bra lying on the floor by her feet in less than five seconds.

"Jeb—" she started.

"Kick off those boots and take off those jeans," he demanded as he pulled his shirt over his head, adding it to the pile of clothes on the floor. "You're gonna get more than fucked, Claire. You're gonna get way more than fucked."

Chapter Three

Jeb stared at the love of his life and tried to decide what to do first. It was clear the shy, sweet girl he'd loved back in school was gone, replaced by the sexy-as-shit, intelligent woman before him. His strong desires when they were younger were nothing compared to what he'd learned during the years he was away. Claire was going to get a hell of an education tonight.

"Lose the jeans, Claire, or I'm getting out my knife and cutting them off you."

She reached for the button and he was impressed by how steady they were. Yep, his shy girl was all woman now and she didn't seem to have any qualms about taking what they both wanted.

He crossed to the kitchen table and sat down to tackle his boots. After removing them he stood, intent on shucking his own jeans, but he paused when he caught sight of Claire, completely naked and standing by the kitchen sink. She took his breath away. Her blonde hair was still long, still wavy like it had been back in school, but she'd filled out—her hips wider, her breasts larger. She had curves in all the right places and his cock thickened even more. Getting out of his jeans was going to be a tricky operation; he could feel the hard flesh pressing against his zipper.

"Come here," he said, his voice rough with the need she inspired. He had a feeling nothing short of burying himself in her wet heat over and over, for months on end, would stave off his hunger for her.

She walked across the room with self-assurance, comfortable in her own skin. Damn, he loved a confident woman. She was beautiful and she knew it. Another debt he owed her late husband. He'd known Bob Hutchins, though only as an acquaintance. They'd never been friends. Working at the ranch these past two weeks had confirmed what he'd suspected for years. Hutchins had been a kind person, shrewd businessman and loving husband. He'd cared for Claire, providing her a safe home, giving her all the things she needed, all the love she deserved.

She stood directly in front of him and her gaze never left his. He reached up to cup her face in his palm. She'd asked him to fuck her. He wasn't about to do anything less than make love to her. He'd loved Claire forever and he was going to show her exactly how much.

Gripping her hips, he turned and placed her on top of the table with her legs dangling over the side. She started to drop down onto her back but he halted her, shaking his head. "Sit up. I want you to watch me."

She shivered slightly as he pulled her ass to the edge of the table and parted her knees. Sinking between her legs, he bent his head to her pussy, taking one long, deep breath of her sweet scent before dragging his tongue along the damp slit.

She sucked in a quick breath, the sound almost a gasp, when he placed his lips around her clit, sucking firmly on the hard little nub. Her hands found his hair and he relished the way her fingers gripped the strands, tugging slightly to keep his mouth on her cunt. He thrust his tongue inside her and she moaned. Glancing up, he found her eyes locked on his as he worked relentlessly to bring her to orgasm. She began thrusting toward him, seeking out more of his dark kisses, silently trying to entice his tongue deeper into her hot chamber.

"Oh God," she cried after several minutes when he nipped her clit with his teeth. He sensed her climax beginning as her movements became more frantic and her groans grew louder. Pulling back, he shoved two fingers inside her pussy while rubbing her clit with his thumb. The unexpected change catapulted her into an orgasm and he smiled when she screamed with her release.

She fell back onto the table and he stood, anxious to drag out her pleasure. He continued to push his fingers inside as her climax waned and she returned to her senses.

"No more," she said weakly.

He shook his head. "Thought you'd figured out a long time ago, Claire, nobody tells me no."

"Too much." Her voice was soft, but he felt her body begin to respond as a fresh wave of moisture dampened his fingers.

"We're only just starting," he said. "Now hush and come for me like a good little girl."

She gave him a brief, breathy laugh, shaking her head. "You do realize every part of me is offended by this macho routine of yours?"

He added another finger to the two in her pussy and she moaned. "Not every part, darlin'. This hot cunt of yours seems to like me just fine."

"Why do I let you do this to me?" she asked, but he suspected her question was more for her benefit than his.

He shushed her, bending over the table to kiss her. "I think you missed me too, Claire-bear."

She smiled as he placed his lips against hers and soon his tongue in her mouth was mimicking the motion of his fingers, moving faster, harder. Her hands tightened on his shoulders as she broke away with a gasp and she came for the second time in half an hour. He gentled his kisses as she trembled under the impact of her orgasm. When her body stilled again, he stood up.

"Roll over," he said.

She hesitated for a moment before turning over on the table, her feet now on the floor, and the new position gave him a bird's-eye view of her firm, round ass. Using his foot, he pushed her legs apart. "Open them," he said as he moved her body to see her clearly.

"Give me your hands." She looked at him over her shoulder and he knew she was wondering if he'd bind her again. He shook his head. "Not this time," he said gently. "I'll tie you up again—you can be sure of that—but this time I plan to put those hands of yours to work."

She reached behind her. Gripping her wrists, he placed her hands on her ass. "Hold yourself open for me."

"What?" she asked, trying to pull her hands away.

"Hold your ass open. I'm not finished playing."

"Nothing there to play with," she replied haughtily and he laughed.

"Claire. I'm bigger and I'm stronger. If you want to fight me on this, go right ahead, but I'm warning you now. I'll win." He let his words sink in as she remained still. He could practically see the wheels in her brain working overtime, considering his threat. "You're curious what I'll do, aren't you?" he asked.

"I'm debating whether or not fighting with you would be worse than being naked and bent over my kitchen table, holding my ass open for your kinky games."

"It's only kinky the first time," he joked and the two of them burst into laughter that only stopped when she conceded his point.

"Fine." She grasped her ass cheeks, parting them a fraction of an inch.

"You'll have to do better than that."

"Maybe this would be easier if I knew what the hell you were planning to do."

He ran his finger along her slit, starting at her clit, drawing through her moisture and not stopping until the tip of his index finger rested at her anus.

"That's what I was afraid of," she said. Her voice was sarcastic and he grinned.

"I don't remember you being such a smartass when we dated in school."

"I'm a lot smarter than I used to be."

He bent over and placed a kiss on the small of her back. "I like it."

Before she could reply, he moved his finger back to her pussy, pushing it inside, wetting it with her juices. Returning to her ass, he slowly pushed until his entire finger was buried inside. He wiggled it a bit and then realized she wasn't breathing.

"Holding your breath 'til you turn blue won't stop me."

A burst of air escaped her lungs. "It's just...I've never..." She paused.

"Do you like it?" he asked, pulling the finger out, only to push it back in again.

"Maybe."

He chuckled, thrusting his finger in and out several more times, letting her get used to the feeling. "I'm going to fuck you here."

"Haven't you ever heard of asking?" Claire's fingers clenched tighter on her ass and he suspected she liked the idea despite her question.

He reached lower with his other hand and wiped her words away, rubbing her clit in the way he knew she loved.

"Oh shit," she moaned, pushing her ass toward him, trying to get more of the sensations he was providing with just two fingers. "Can't. Come. Again. Too soon."

"I'm not stopping until you do, darlin'. Give me another one of those pretty orgasms and then we can go upstairs and get started."

"Started?" Her question ended with a sharp groan as he deepened the pressure on her clit and added another finger in her ass. "God help me. Can't stop." A strong shudder racked her slim frame as she came once more. He grinned, stunned to discover he could go on pushing her over the top all night without worrying about his own pleasure. He loved seeing her like this, driven out of her mind by a few touches from him.

Grasping her arms, he pulled her up from the table, turning her to face him, and then he lifted her into a fireman's hold over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" she asked with a breathless laugh.

"Taking you to bed," he replied, walking out of the kitchen and upstairs. His cock ached with a pain that would only subside once he'd gotten inside her body. At the doorway to her room, he paused, placing her on her feet. He knew this was the room she'd shared with her husband and he felt as if he should give her one more chance to change her mind. He wasn't about to let this relationship begin with regrets.

He looked at her and started to speak, but she placed her finger against his lips. "I want you. I've always wanted you."

He grinned and nodded. "Good. Now get in that room and in that bed. I want you on your back with your hands beside your head and your legs spread wide. Got it?"

She looked for a moment as if she wanted to call him out for his imperious tone, but instead she entered the room and followed his instructions to the letter. Jeb knew the pause after each of his demands would likely take a long time to go away, but he didn't mind. It meant his woman had a mind of her own and she would always take the time to decide for herself. It also meant she wouldn't do anything she didn't want to do. It was one of the attributes he loved best about her. She would never be a doormat.

He shed his jeans, feeling instant relief as his cock was released from the constraining material. Walking to the bed, he enjoyed the admiring way she gazed at his body. He'd ridden the rodeo circuit for years and had the scars to prove it, but she didn't seem to mind the imperfections.

"Must've hurt," she murmured when he reached the side of the bed.

He glanced down, taking in at least five nasty-looking scars. "Which one?"

"All of them," she answered, crooking her finger at him. "Come here and let me kiss them better."

He knelt on the bed, crawling over her body. "You can kiss them afterward. If I'm not inside you in the next minute, this isn't going to end well."

She wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing his cock closer to his goal. "I'll kiss them later then. Fuck m—"

He cut her off with a quick kiss. "Not this time, darlin'. I'm gonna fuck you, tie you up, spank your ass and pull your hair before the night is over, but this time I'm gonna make love to you."

She blinked quickly and he wondered if she was fighting back tears. "I'd like that."

He kissed her for a long time, both of them content now that they knew the moment of truth was at hand. Jeb was determined to make this a night they'd both remember.

Claire's hands seemed to take on a life of their own, exploring his body and driving his need for her even higher. She caressed his chest, lightly scratched his shoulders and back, and gripped his hips for a moment before reaching down to grasp his cock. He broke off the kiss, trying to suck in some much-needed air as she stroked his erection with a firm grip and a steady motion that was slowly driving him out of his mind.

When it became too much, he stopped her with a hand on her wrist. "Enough," he said. "For now."

He started to rise but she placed a hand on his chest, stopping him. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not leaving, darlin'. Just gonna grab a condom out of my jeans."

She didn't move her hand and he sensed she was trying to come to some sort of decision. Her eyes when she finally spoke were filled with a sudden sadness he couldn't understand. "I can't get pregnant. Bob and I tried for nearly a decade. Endometriosis."

His heart broke for her. Claire had always been great with kids, making loads of pocket money as a babysitter when they were younger. He wondered why she'd never taken the plunge into motherhood, though a selfish part of him that he wasn't proud of was grateful he'd never had to see her belly grow large with another man's baby. "Oh, Claire. I'm so sorry."

"It just wasn't meant to be." She looked at him, shrugging lightly. "So a condom really isn't necessary for that kind of protection."

Her words made it clear what she was saying. "If you're asking me if I'm clean, I am, but I'm still gonna leave the decision up to you."

"We don't need it," she said.

He kissed her gently. The time for words had passed. He placed his cock at her opening and held her gaze as he slowly entered. Their eyes never wavered and when he pushed in fully, he held still for a moment and they smiled.

"Still fits," she teased and he laughed.

"Never had a doubt." He began to move, slowly at first, relishing the fact that he was back in her arms, her body. Claire was the only woman he'd ever wanted in a forever kind of way, and having her back again was a heady, incredible feeling. After her marriage to Hutchins, he'd gone into a deep depression, drinking heavily, avoiding his friends and family for months. Traveling with the rodeo had relieved some of those dark feelings and eventually he'd managed to pull himself together. Having this second chance to be with her was something he'd never expected and there was no way in hell he was letting her go again.

Their movements synchronized, sped up as both of them neared climax. Claire's soft sighs and groans drove him higher and he dropped onto his elbows, kissing her as he felt the end near. "Come with me," he murmured against her lips.

She pushed her mouth more firmly to his, kissing him thoroughly for just a moment before her head collapsed back onto the pillow and she cried out with her orgasm. Her vagina clenched against his cock and his balls tightened before he filled her sweet body with his come.

"God damn," he breathed, the power of his climax almost making him dizzy it was so fucking good.

Collapsing to her side, he pulled her into his arms. Her head rested on his chest and he was struck by how right the embrace felt.

"That was amazing," she said after several minutes. He agreed, pressing a kiss on the top of her head. Then they started talking, reminiscing about high school, the ranch. Jeb told her about his new nephew and how his sister Liv and her husband Rem were handling parenthood. They

reconnected all the dots and the flame that had been rekindled the day he walked through her door burst into flames, higher and hotter than the biggest bonfire.

Just when Jeb thought she'd drifted off to sleep, Claire threw her leg over his hips, straddling him. "Tired?" she asked with a sinful grin.

"Climb on, cowgirl. Take a ride. Gotta warn you, though, this bull is bound to kick hard and fast right out of the gate."

He expected her to laugh at his joke, but she was too intent on her goal and he sucked in a deep breath when she gripped his cock, guiding it to her cunt and taking him inside her slowly.

She rode him like a true cowgirl and he fought to hold back his release, anxious to prolong the sensations surging through his body as she took him just the way he loved. They came together in an explosion of stars and flashing white lights, and when she collapsed on his chest, they remained joined.

Her breathing deepened and he lay still for several minutes, listening to her sleep and grinning like a damn fool. He hadn't just come home, he'd come alive again after almost a decade – and there was no force on earth that would drive him away again.

Chapter Four

"Rise and shine, Claire-bear." He chuckled as she slowly opened her eyes, squinting against the sunlight streaming through her bedroom window. He'd woken her up twice more during the night and they'd made love, kissing and touching and talking until the wee hours of morning.

"What time is it?" she asked, her voice gruff from sleep.

"Nearly noon."

"What?" She sat bolt upright, digging a painful elbow into his chest as she moved.

"Ouch," he said, rubbing the sore spot.

She paid him no mind and started to get out of bed, but he stopped her with a firm grip on her hips. "Where are you going?"

"I didn't feed the guys breakfast and now it's almost lunch. Plus, you were going to work on that fence on the east pasture. The hands are probably wondering where the hell we are."

He pulled her down onto the bed, despite her attempts to fight him off. Straddling her waist, he held her hands against the pillow.

"Dammit, Jeb! Let go of me. I need to get up."

He shook his head. "I got up hours ago. Set out boxes of cereal for the hands, told them to pack up some sandwiches for lunch then sent them out to work on the fence. They won't be back until dinnertime."

She stopped struggling and looked at him. "You did?"

"Yep. I did."

Her face was such a mixture of emotions he didn't know what to say next.

"That was nice of you," she finally said, and he grinned.

"It's sort of my job, darlin'. I'm the foreman. Truth be told, I should have headed out with them but I couldn't stand the thought of not watching you wake up."

She sighed and closed her eyes. "Jeb. Last night was..." Her words died away and he tried to wait patiently for the rest.

When she failed to continue, he finished for her. "Last night was perfect, overdue, hot as shit."

Her gaze returned to his face. "All of those, but I think I would have added 'unwise' to the list."

"Why?" He tried to fight back his anger at her comment. It was obvious now that the sun had risen, she was going to try to push him away—return him to the foreman/past-lover box she seemed hell-bent on keeping him in. She pushed against him until he relented, letting her rise until she was sitting beside him on the mattress.

"Because I know where this is going, where we'll end up. We've been here before, remember?"

"No, I don't remember. As far as I know, we've never been here." He couldn't figure out what she was talking about, but hell would freeze over before he let her break things off between them again. She may have made the right decision over a decade earlier, but from where he was sitting, they were exactly where they should be at this point.

"Dammit, Jeb. You need a woman a helluva lot less independent than me. I'm not the same girl you knew back in school. The one who was content to let you make all the decisions, call all the shots. I've been running this ranch without Bob for nearly a year and I think I've done a pretty damn good job."

"I agree," he said, but she continued talking.

"I'm not the sort of woman to let a man just walk in and take over, and though I appreciate you taking care of getting the ranch hands fed and working this morning, you should have woken me up."

"Next time I will."

Again she ignored him. "This is still my home, my ranch, my life. I'll either make my own way or I'll fall flat on my face, but at least it'll be me who does it."

"I don't have a problem with that, though I wouldn't mind falling with you if you'd let me."

"And another thing—" She paused and he knew she'd finally heard him. "What?"

"This is your ranch, Claire. I'm not trying to take that from you. I'm not looking for a slave or maid or whatever else it is you seem to think I'm after. I want a partner, a friend, a lover. I want *you*."

"But you like to call the shots..." she began.

"In bed. Sometimes. It seems to me there were two of us taking what we needed, what we wanted last night. I get that you aren't the same girl I used to love, darlin', but I think you need to understand I'm not the same boy either. So I go a little alpha in the bedroom—"

"A little?" she asked, her voice betraying the fact the storm had passed. Her voice was light, her eyes laughing.

"Very funny. I think the last two weeks should have proven to you that we're still compatible, in bed and out."

She nodded, falling silent for several long moments. He gave her time to sort out her thoughts, knowing he'd continue to press his case until the cows came home if need be.

"Jeb, I'm afraid I've been acting like a fool since I woke up. Can we start this morning over?"

"Can we start it over with sex rather than talking?" he asked.

She laughed. "Given the fact I've only just now gotten my foot out of my mouth, I think less talk, more action would be ideal."

"How do you feel about letting me take over for a while?"

Claire rolled her eyes. "Not very masculine if you ask permission first."

Jeb shrugged, wanting to joke with her but unable to push back the anxiety, the concern that she would still cut and run. "You have a point there. Sure it won't scare you away?"

She cupped his cheek with her hand. "I'm sure."

"You're mine, Claire."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

He grasped her wrists, using them to push her down onto her back once more. "Remember you said that." Holding her hands by her head, he kissed her hard, possessively. He didn't want to leave any doubt in her mind who she belonged to or exactly where he was going to take them.

When he pulled away, he was pleased by the flushed, hungry look on her face. "Don't move a muscle," he said. "I need to grab a few things."

She looked as if she wanted to question him, but he stopped her with a finger against her lips. "No talking without permission."

She gave him the narrow-eyed look he loved and he countered it with a stern face of his own. She'd agreed to play this by his rules and he was ready to take advantage of that gift.

He rose from the bed, rummaging through her dresser until he found several scarves. Returning to her side, he started to open the drawer to her nightstand but she sat up quickly, protesting. "Wait."

Jackpot. He opened the drawer and found exactly what he was seeking. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "Nice collection," he said with a wicked grin, pulling out one of her vibrators and a tube of lubrication.

She gave him a dirty look. "My husband died. I've been alone for a year."

"You're not going to hear any complaints from me, Claire-bear. I like a woman with a healthy sex drive."

She rolled her eyes but smiled. "Something tells me it's about to get a whole lot healthier."

"Oh yeah," he agreed. "Darlin', did I give you permission to move? Or to talk?"

"Oops," she replied and he laughed.

"Roll over. I want you on your hands and knees."

She moved into position and he placed his pile of goodies on the mattress before crawling up to kneel behind her. She jerked when he placed two quick smacks on her ass. "That's for failing to listen."

Before she could blast him, he ran his hand between her thighs, provoking a pleased hiss instead. Pushing two fingers inside her pussy, he felt the rush of her arousal coating him. "So wet," he murmured. Picking up her vibrator, he removed his fingers, filling her instead with the cool plastic toy.

She shivered as he pushed it inside and turned it on. "Jeb," she cried out. He kept the toy set on low, turning his attention to her ass.

"This is going to be cold at first too." Opening the lubrication, he squeezed a dollop on her anus, slowly working it into her tight hole. Taking his time, he stretched her with one finger, then two and finally three, generously lubricating her ass. He'd taken her virginity fourteen years earlier. Today he was going to take it again.

Removing his fingers, he caressed her ass. "Lie on your back, darlin'."

She moved slowly, the vibrator still working its magic in her pussy, driving her to the brink but not providing enough stimulation to push her over the edge.

"Jeb, please," she whispered, using her legs to try to draw him to her.

"Bad girl," he said. "Maybe we should make sure you aren't tempted to be naughty." He reached over her head, tying her left hand to the corner post of the headboard with a scarf, and then he repeated the process with the right. She tugged against the bonds and surprise crossed her face when she realized she was truly caught. She wouldn't escape until he allowed it.

"And now, for the rest," he said, picking up the last two scarves.

"The rest?"

He didn't answer. Instead he lifted her left leg up toward her shoulder, tying it to her left elbow. Good thing she was flexible. While he could see her struggling with the position, he did the same with her other leg. The bondage lifted her ass off the mattress and held her open. Her breathing picked up, became labored, and he glanced at her face. If he saw any distress at all, he'd free her. He smiled when he realized she was aroused—very, very aroused.

"I'm going to take your ass," he said.

"Do it," she whispered.

He reached down to turn up the speed on the vibrator still lodged in her cunt and she screamed. Gripping her ass firmly, he pushed the head of his cock inside the tight pucker. She was on the verge of an orgasm and he knew it wouldn't take much to make her come.

Moving slowly, fighting to ignore how incredible the pulses of the vibrator felt against his hard flesh, he pushed forward until he was seated to the hilt. She came at that exact same instant and Jeb's jaw locked against the power of her climax. Unable to hold back, he began thrusting shallowly in her ass and Claire's orgasm morphed into a series of smaller but still forceful ones. Her screams turned to moans and then to pleading—more, harder, faster. When

he couldn't hold back any longer, he succumbed to his own climax, coming harder than he'd ever come in his life.

Untying her, he gathered her close, massaging her muscles and murmuring sweet nothings as they both struggled to regain their wits and their breath.

After several silent minutes, Claire looked at him, cupping his rough, unshaven jaw with her hand. "I love you, Jeb."

He smiled widely, her words the sweetest he'd ever heard. "I love you too, Claire-bear. Always."

Epilogue

Two months later

"Claire?" Jeb's voice drifted to her from the hallway.

"In here," she called. She sat on the edge of the bathtub and stared at the little stick. It was wrong. It had to be. She glanced at the three other pregnancy tests, all of them declaring the same thing. She was pregnant. How could she be pregnant?

She chuckled to herself. "You know perfectly well how you got pregnant." Sex 24/7 with the most virile man on the planet. She was knocked up. As she looked at the little plus sign, she waited for the panic to set in. It didn't. It wouldn't. She felt besieged with complete, utter happiness.

"Are you okay? What's taking you so long?" Jeb asked. The door started to open despite the fact she'd locked it.

He stepped inside, stopping in his tracks when he spotted her surrounded by the open boxes of pregnancy tests.

"Did you pick the lock?" she asked, aware that her question at a time like this was silly and insignificant. She hadn't shared her suspicions with Jeb, hadn't told him about her bizarre bouts with nausea that only came after breakfast, after he'd headed out with the ranch hands to work each day.

"Yeah. What the hell are you doing?"

She rose slowly, suddenly wishing she'd warned him. *She* was stunned and she'd suspected the truth for nearly a week. Poor Jeb was about to be completely blindsided.

"Well. It would appear we're going to have a baby. Surprise," she added lamely.

Jeb stood motionless long enough that the anxiety she'd managed to hold at bay started creeping in. She'd told him she couldn't conceive. What if Jeb didn't want children? What if he thought she'd lied about not being able to get pregnant in hopes of trapping him or something? "I really thought I couldn't—"

"A baby?" he said, interrupting her, and she nodded.

"I hope you don't think —"

"We're going to have a baby? You and me?" he repeated.

Her nerves erupted, frustration taking over. "Yes, Jeb. You and I are going to have a baby. Apparently your sperm are super swimmers and one of the little boogers managed to find an egg inside me despite my medical issues and —"

He laughed. "Hot fucking damn!" He walked toward her and for the first time since she'd dropped the bomb on him, she knew things were going to be okay. "I'm going to be a daddy!" He picked her up and spun her around as she giggled.

When he put her down, he knelt in front of her stomach and her laughter morphed into happy tears as he kissed her still-flat tummy. "She's going to be beautiful, tall and slim with your blonde hair and blue eyes. I'm going to spoil her rotten."

"What if it's a boy?" she asked.

"I'll spoil him rotten too."

"You're really happy? I don't want you to think I lied to you. I swear I —"

He looked up, shock written on his face. "Lied to me? Jesus, Claire. I know you'd never lie. Not about something like this. Besides, haven't you figured it out yet? I'm exactly where I want to be. I love you." He took her hand, kissing her palm before tightening his grip. "Will you marry me, Claire? Will you be my wife?"

She smiled mischievously, his words filling her with delight. She pretended to consider his offer. "Hmmm," she said at last. "Maybe."

He laughed as he stood, picking her up and carrying her to their bedroom where he tossed her onto the bed. "Maybe I should find a way to convince you to change that maybe to a yes."

She lay back, beckoning him closer with her finger. "Maybe you should."

The End

About the Author

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

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

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

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

Mari welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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