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*Ménage Everlasting*



ABBY BLAKE

## Fire

Jack and Reece have known Christina since high school, but she's never shown a preference for one or the other. Unwilling to risk destroying their lifelong friendship, neither man has confessed his feelings for her.

Christina is the girl no one notices. At least that's what she thinks. She's in love with Reece and Jack, but they treat her only as a friend. Besides, apart from the fact that neither has romantic notions, she'd never be able to choose between them if they did.

But a devastating bushfire and the tragic loss of their homes and many neighbors' highlights how precious life is and how important it is to grasp the happiness you want. The relationship that grows is one none of them had previously thought possible, but will it survive the condemnation of more conservative social conventions?

**Genre:** Contemporary, Ménage a Trois/Quatre

**Length:** 23,180 words

**FIRE**

**Abby Blake**

**MENAGE EVERLASTING**



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

**FIRE**

Copyright © 2011 by Abby Blake

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-226-7

First E-book Publication: January 2011

Cover design by *Les Byerley*

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Siren Publishing, Inc.

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# **DEDICATION**

For my husband who knows he's the leading man in all of my stories  
even when there's more than one hero.

# **FIRE**

**ABBY BLAKE**

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## **Chapter One**

Christina spent the day protecting her house from ember attack. The bushfire still burned several kilometers away, but the wind drove the flaming pieces of leaves and branches into her yard and onto the roof of her home. A few found dry grass and caught rapidly, but so far, she'd managed to douse them before they became a problem.

For the past few days, she'd listened intently to the news reports and weather warnings, making sure she stayed informed of the fire's progress and direction. In this area, thousands of hectares of inaccessible bush land could burn for weeks before reaching any homes, but when it reached them, residents needed to be prepared.

Her small bush property held several rainwater tanks and a small dam at the back. She'd checked and rechecked that the water pump was fueled and ready to go if the power failed and the town water stopped flowing.

She wore her mobile phone on her hip, the radio function playing in her ear as she waited for the latest fire update. Authorities expected the wind to turn around later today, effectively moving her little house out of the bushfire's path. However, she could see the smoke, understood its general location, and remained quite prepared to face it if the fire arrived.



This wasn't her first go on this particular merry-go-round. Bushfire was a common threat in these parts, and she'd spent many hot, exhausting hours defending her home from ember attack and bushfire over the years. The sweaty, sticky, grimy feeling from working in dust, heat, and smoke was a very familiar one.

These days, she didn't have the time to volunteer with the rural fire service. Running her own business meant she could no longer take off at a moment's notice and be gone for days or weeks fighting bushfires, but like most residents in this area, she was well informed and capable of staying to defend her own home.

Christina glanced over at the house next door. Her elderly neighbors had gone on an ocean cruise this summer, and Christina was more than happy to keep an eye on their home as well. She also felt secretly grateful that she didn't need to worry about the older couple being overcome by the heat and smoke.

Even now, when the fire still burned miles away from her, the acrid smoke stung her eyes and seared her lungs. She wore a bandana over her face, keeping it wet with water to reduce the amount of smoke she inhaled, but it didn't quite stop the urge to cough.

However, Christina felt reasonably happy with the way things were going so far, so she stopped to stretch the muscles in her back and drink some water. Bushfires could pass through in a minute or days, depending on the temperature and the wind and a dozen other factors, so she knew it could be a very long day and night. Staying alert and hydrated was critical.

Faintly, she could hear the sirens of several fire trucks. They seemed to be heading closer to her, and she listened intently, trying to figure out the direction the noise came from. She almost yelped in surprise when they went screaming through the side road about half a mile away but heading away from the fire.

As she turned to watch the vehicles, a blast of heat hit her square in the face. Confused for a moment, Christina stood still, barely comprehending the sight she found.

*There wasn't supposed to be a bushfire behind her.*

The sky was filled with smoke, the air hotter and grittier than anything she'd ever experienced before. The sun blurred out of the sky as angry flames roared up the valley behind her. The heat, the intense furnace blast, stole the very moisture from her body.

*Firestorm.*

These were the fires that killed. The fires so unpredictable, so violent, so extreme that even the most experienced firefighters had little chance of escaping. Fear gripped her, her gut twisting as survival instincts screamed at her to flee. Trying to suck in a clean breath, Christina gagged and coughed as she spun on her heel, seeking exit, seeking safety.

Panic threatened to drive her to her knees. It was too late to evacuate. Too late to hide in her well-prepared home. The firestorm would explode onto her house, not devour it slowly. She had only one place left to go.

Spinning around, frantically searching for an exit, she thought she heard a car speeding down the street toward her. She could barely make out the headlights in the haze, but it seemed to be moving erratically, like the driver had no control.

\* \* \* \*

Jack maneuvered the four-wheel-drive truck down the street. He'd lived here all his life but had never seen anything like this. The firestorm devoured everything, and it felt like the whole world was on fire.

He moved the vehicle as fast as he dared, visibility very low from the smoke. Cinders and other flaming debris swirled in the hazy, orange air, most of the buildings and trees on fire. Houses that had stood for more than a hundred years would soon be just piles of rubble. Trees that had grown since before James Cook stepped onto

Australian shores lay flattened across houses and vehicles, their long lives over.

So far, he and Reece hadn't seen anyone else. They'd stayed to defend their homes but had, in the end, been forced to abandon their efforts. Defeated, they'd climbed into the truck he'd managed to save only by parking it in the middle of an empty, recently tilled field and headed toward town.

"Do we know who else stayed behind?" Reece growled the question in a rough, raspy voice, a side effect of their continued inhalation of bushfire smoke.

"Johnsons evacuated yesterday afternoon." Even with the windows closed, he needed to yell over the roar of the fire. "The Kennedys and McCormacks stayed, I think. Christina would've stayed. She used to volunteer with the RFS."

"We should swing by her place." Reece said it casually, like they were dropping in on a friend, not traveling through a firestorm to check on a woman they both knew and liked. Jack heard the wobble in his best friend's voice, not fooled by the laid-back Aussie attitude that Reece tried to project. He turned at the next intersection, pointing the truck toward the place where Christina's house probably no longer stood.

\* \* \* \*

Christina watched horrified as, with a loud, screeching, twisting sound, the car careened out of control and slammed into another vehicle abandoned on the street right in front of her. The engine still roared as if the driver continued to depress the accelerator. Instinctively, she ran to the car. Through the thick smoke, she stumbled her way over to the driver's side and tried to open it using the handle. Searing pain flashed through her hand as skin blistered and stuck to the handle.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she pulled the door open and fell forward, trying to find the driver. With her uninjured hand, she felt for a pulse. Nothing. Moving her hand again, she tried in vain to see what she was doing, where she was touching. Still no pulse. She pulled her hand back, realizing belatedly it was covered in black ooze. She had no idea what it was and fell back out of the car a little bewildered.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind, and a torch shone into the car. Even with the added light, it was difficult to understand what she was looking at. The driver of the car seemed to be looking at them with a hideous grin, the head hanging at an awkward angle. The torch revealed the face was severely burned and the skin seemed to have melted down the body like sludge.

Christina's stomach emptied its meager contents without warning. The person behind her quickly pulled her away from the macabre scene.

The roaring was so loud now that nothing else could be heard, not even the houses and cars exploding into flames around them. Electrical lines were weaving, spitting sparks in the air. The smoke made breathing difficult, and she coughed continuously now. Her eyeballs felt dried out and gritty, and she found them difficult to close. She'd never really believed in hell, but she was really afraid she was about to live it.

She was pushed and pulled into the cabin of a truck. Unable able to keep her eyes open and coughing hard, she barely registered the vehicle plowing through her flower gardens toward the dam at the back of her property. It was totally obscured in the smoke and heat, and she hoped like hell whoever was guiding the truck knew where he was going.

A moment later, the vehicle stopped, and strong arms grabbed her and helped her as she ran. Cool water flooded her clothes as she was dragged into the middle of the dam. Her vision blurred. Coughing

hard and unable to catch her breath, she clung desperately to the person beside her.

Two sets of arms wrapped around her, holding her tightly, making her feel a little safer. As selfish as the thought was, she was really glad she wasn't going to die alone.

\* \* \* \*

Jack held Christina close against him, vaguely aware that Reece held her as well. They hadn't even seen her next to the crashed car. They'd stopped to see if the occupant was still alive, not even registering they were out front of Christina's home. Finding her leaning over the driver had startled them almost as much as the person's appearance. The driver's burns had been so horrific Jack hoped he would never see anything like that again although he suspected it would be a prominent theme in his nightmares for many years to come.

It seemed a little lighter now, the choking smoke a little thinner, and he hoped the bushfire moved away from them and not directly into them. They'd left the truck in the middle of the field, hopefully isolated enough not to be consumed by the fire but far enough away from where they crouched in the dam if it did. He'd seen dozens of fires in this area, but this was the first one he'd seen that had been so savage, so unpredictable, so unforgiving. It seemed anyone left behind had little chance of escape.

God, he hoped he was wrong.

He prayed again all of his neighbors and friends had left the area safely, knowing even as he thought it that it would not be true. Everything had happened so quickly he'd been lucky he and Reece had already been in his truck. If they hadn't already decided their properties were a total loss and been moving down the hill searching for neighbors they could assist, they might not have gotten this far.

They'd heard the roar first and then felt an intense, hot wind herald the fire. It almost pushed the vehicle off the road. Visibility had dropped to nearly zero, but Jack had been certain that reducing their speed would be a very bad idea, so he'd sped through the streets, only slowing when he glimpsed taillights in front of him. He'd almost run into the back of the other car as it smashed into something and stopped.

Squelching his own survival instinct, he'd leapt from his four-wheel drive, slammed the door closed hoping to save some of the clear air, and run to the vehicle to find Christina already trying to help. Reece had been right behind him with the torch. One glimpse at the driver's face in the torchlight had convinced him that if the poor soul wasn't dead right then, he soon would be. The driver's face and hair had been completely burned, like his entire body had been on fire, and the skin had shriveled and split across the face. Horrendous burns of that magnitude would've been inside as well as out. Reece had shined the torch quickly around the inside of the car, Jack noting with relief that the driver had been the only occupant and they weren't staring at the remains of a mother and her children.

They'd grabbed Christina between them, driven the truck a few hundred yards, and taken refuge in the dam.

He was pretty sure she'd been burned but didn't know how badly. She sagged against him, but he could feel her still coughing, so he was reassured that she wasn't unconscious or dead, and he prayed a little harder the fire would pass through before that changed.

\* \* \* \*

They stood a lot longer in the dam than was probably necessary, but shock held Christina immobile as she watched her home and everything she owned burn to the ground. She hadn't even seen the tree fall on her car, but the wood still burned where it fell.

They'd been in the water for a while before she realized they weren't entirely alone. Two small, gray kangaroos had taken refuge in the water as well, and they'd been careful to give them plenty of space. Despite the marsupial's placid appearance, like all wild animals, kangaroos could be lethal when they felt threatened and had reportedly been able to drown attack dogs that pursued them into water. Christina held no wish to find out if it were true.

Their dam-buddies had left the water quite a while ago, shaking their furred bodies and then bounding into the blackened debris without so much as a goodbye, yet still the three humans stayed.

She sensed Jack and Reece were giving her time, letting her decide when they would move. Finally, she found the courage, and the three of them dragged each other from the water. The dam wasn't really very deep, so they'd all been sort of crouching, half sitting in the water. Her knees ached from the angle, but at least she hadn't needed to tread water the whole time.

Mud squished into her boots every step she took, and she hoped at least one of her water tanks had survived the inferno so she could rinse her face and hands and find a drink. Out of the cool water, her burned fingers throbbed like the devil, but she remembered reading somewhere that pain was a good thing when it came to burns. No pain meant damaged nerves, so she'd rather be in pain.

Dehydration was becoming a problem, but she'd resisted the urge to drink the water in the dam, concerned the still water might present more danger than temporary, mild dehydration. Considering the state of her car, they might be forced to drink the water before the end of the day, but until it became critical, she was willing to pass.

Sounds still felt dulled, seemingly muffled to her ears, the roar of the fire having a temporary effect on her hearing, kind of like the day after a rock concert. She felt pure relief when she saw Jack's truck undamaged and smiled at the men on either side of her. Then she glanced at the state of her clothing, ruefully noted she was not about to dazzle them with her appearance, and berated herself for silly

vanity in the same breath. She was alive, and she'd had two of the town's most eligible bachelors come to rescue her. She should be smiling.

"Look what the cat dragged in." Okay, Prince Charming he *ain't*.

"Thanks, Reece." She smiled at him anyway.

"Need a lift?" Jack asked as he approached his truck. "I was just admiring the new addition to your car."

Despite everything she'd been through, despite everything she'd lost, she found herself laughing at his observation.

"Thanks. I'd love a lift."

It was almost surreal. They were standing in the middle of a burned-out waste land, soaking wet, boots filled with mud, and talking like they'd run into each other at the pub. Christina shook her head at the typical Aussieness of the situation. They'd probably lost everything, too, yet they were the same Aussie larrikins they'd always been.

That was why she almost buckled at the knees when Reece dragged her into his embrace, crushed her against his hard body, and held her tight. He'd barely released her before Jack claimed her, holding her head pressed against his heart as he shook slightly.

"I'm glad you're okay." The words were low and quiet, barely words at all, but even through her dulled hearing, she managed to understand them just the same.

Several mud-boot-emptying minutes later, she climbed into the truck. She didn't miss the fact that Jack distracted her while Reece went to check on the burned-out car at the front of her property. Despite thinking of herself as an independent female, she was very grateful they protected her this way. The driver's burned face would likely haunt her for a very long time, and she really had no wish to see it again.

Jack helped her into the truck, still a mess but no longer squishy although the leftover mud between her toes was rapidly drying to a hard crust. She'd give anything for a hot shower right about now but



settled for a sip from the bottle of water Jack pressed into her hand. She was really tempted to tip the water over her sticky toes but held on to enough sense to realize they weren't out of danger just yet.

More water might be farther away than they knew.

The inside of the truck seemed a little cooler than the temperature outside, and she slid into the middle of the bench seat gratefully. Jack climbed into the driver's seat and Reece into the passenger side.

"We need a doctor to look at Christina's hand," Jack said as he started the truck.

"It's not that bad, really. It can wait. I'd rather check on our neighbors first," she said, trying to hide just how much the damn thing was throbbing. It hurt all the way up to her elbow now, but as burns went, she'd seen far worse.

Jack started to shake his head, but Reece eyed her thoughtfully and said, "Let's swing past the McCormack and Kennedy properties, and then we'll head into town." Reece still sounded casual, and Christina wondered at his ability to remain so calm when all she wanted to do was run screaming. Her next words tumbled out of her mouth before she had a chance to analyze the thought properly.

"I'm not sure there still is a town. The firestorm came up the valley, a direct line from there. I think we probably need to head to the SES headquarters or maybe the hospital down south."

Both Jack and Reece turned to her, stunned expressions on their faces.

"You think this fire went through town?"

She shrugged her shoulders, not really sure of anything at this point. "Town" didn't really accurately describe the tiny collection of shops and tourist attractions. It was really no more than the pub, a few locally owned stores, and a couple of B&Bs. They had a police station, but it wasn't even open in the off-season. The entire town was basically a small tourist escape and a meeting place for the few hundred residents who lived on variously sized properties up and down the side of the mountain.

“Okay, Kennedys’ place first.”

Jack put the truck in gear and carefully moved around the debris littering the road. It seemed to take forever to travel the few kilometers to the Kennedy property, the smoke, fallen trees, and damaged state of the roads making travel difficult. The Kennedy place seemed deserted, so they continued on to the McCormacks’.

Again, they found the property abandoned, but in both cases, the vehicles were missing, so Christina quietly prayed the families were making their way toward the nearest safe location.

Their decision to go into town was thwarted by a fallen tree across the only access road, so Jack turned the truck toward the highway and headed for the nearest SES headquarters.

Smoke still hung heavily in the air, even with the windows wound up tight, and the three occupants choked on the dry air, coughing and retching intermittently. It was difficult to continue conversation under such conditions, and all three fell quiet as Jack drove the truck through blackened scenery on almost unrecognizable roads.

Every muscle in Christina’s body screamed for relief. She’d been so tense, so frightened for so long that sheer exhaustion claimed her, and unbelievably, she almost fell asleep. The truck stopped suddenly, jolting her fully awake.

Reece was out of the cabin before she realized what was happening, but the sight before her had her scrambling after him. Two vehicles were in the middle of the road. Debris from broken windshields and taillights littered the scene. Fallen trees and broken branches still smoldered everywhere.

Barely able to comprehend the destruction Christina finally realized the sedan belonged to the Kennedys. Without another thought, she dashed to the car and leaned through the broken window, hoping, praying she would find someone alive.

But the Kennedys were already dead. Both were covered in blood and soot, their injuries most likely from the car accident, but the

intense heat of the bushfire and the lack of oxygen probably also contributing to their deaths.

Reece pulled her away and then held her close, his voice low, the words unheard but soothing nonetheless. He rocked her against him for several moments before she realized the high-pitched keening sound that filled her ears came from her own mouth.

She could feel Jack holding her arm, keeping the hand away from her body, and it took a long time to remember it was the source of the physical pain throbbing through her.

“Babe,” a deep voice rumbled beside her ear, “we have to move. Get you to a hospital.”

“But we need to do something.” She could hear the hysteria in her voice. “We can’t just leave them here.”

“Chris, honey, they’re gone. We can’t help them now. We’ll tell the authorities as soon as we get to safety,” Jack said calmly.

## Chapter Two

It seemed to take hours to get to the hospital. Roads that weren't damaged or blocked were full of cars, all trying to head toward the larger town and hospital. Jack had grabbed a bucket from the back of the truck, poured fresh, clean water into it, and made her soak her burned hand. The water helped a little, but every jolt of the road sent pain coursing up her elbow and into her shoulder.

She shook her head, tears welling again, as she thought of the Kennedys. They'd lived in this town their entire lives and had even raised a couple of kids here. Never would they have had reason to believe a bushfire could be so intense, so deadly. Bushfires were usually somewhat predictable, and the safest place for residents was in their own homes. Year after year, residents of their small community had doused embers as they fell, taken refuge inside their homes as the fire passed, and then doused any spot-fires that had found purchase.

That's the way bushfires in this area had been as long as she could remember. Most often, it had been the back burning operations that got closest to the town, the RFS volunteers burning the fire's fuel before it could reach homes. Literally fighting fire with fire, they'd spend days and nights tending controlled fires so when the actual bushfire reached them, there was nothing left to burn.

But firestorms? Firestorms were different.

Normal bushfires had the flames leaping from place to place, either by close proximity or flaming embers, but with a firestorm, the heat was so intense the trees burst into flame before the actual flames

came close. Stories of fireballs and sudden explosions had seemed almost exaggeration until she'd seen it with her own eyes.

She wriggled her toes, the uncomfortable feeling of dried mud somehow penetrating the pain from her burned hand and the grief clouding her heart. She hadn't known the Kennedys well, but in such a small community, everyone knew someone who knew someone. She glanced at Jack, noticing the stiff way he held his jaw, and wondered if he'd known them better than she realized, until it occurred to her that she hadn't recognized the second car.

"Who was in the other car?" She blurted the words before she could take them back, the panicked tone of her voice causing her chest to tighten, and she coughed painfully against her damaged throat. Strong arms wrapped harder around her, and Reece pulled her closer. He'd never really let her go since they'd climbed back into the cabin, and she was grateful for his support.

"I don't know," he said quietly.

She glanced at his face but couldn't read the expression. He responded by pulling her head against his chest, holding her face against his heart. She guessed that even if he didn't know who had been in the car, the sight haunted him the same way the corpses of the Kennedys would stay with her.

"Damn!" Jack's whispered exclamation had her turning back to the windscreen. The traffic hadn't moved in fifteen minutes, and now it looked like it wouldn't move at all. A police officer made his way down the line of cars, stopping to talk to each driver along the way. Many turned their cars onto the other side of the road and headed back the way they had come.

Jack wound down his window as the officer approached. They obviously weren't the first bedraggled survivors he'd seen as he smiled kindly and asked if anyone was hurt.

"The missus burned her hand pretty badly, but otherwise, we're okay, mate."

She almost chuckled at his outrageous answer. The “missus,” indeed, but she knew what he was doing. He wasn’t going to let her into the medical center without him by her side. The entire town knew she’d been alone since her mother’s recent death, and Jack was making sure Christina had someone to lean on.

“Okay,” the policeman said. “There’s an accident blocking the road up ahead. Drive up as close as you can, and then park the truck on the side of the road.” He looked past Jack to Christina. “Will you be okay to walk? The hospital entrance is only about half a kilometer past the accident.”

“No worries. I’ll get hubby to carry me.” She smiled at the officer, grateful for his help but also embarrassed by the fuss. The burn was painful, her elbow and shoulder aching as well now, but considering the scope of the fire, probably the least of the problems the hospital would be treating today.

Reece kissed the top of her head as he loosened his grip on her waist. “I’ll be right back.” He said the words with his trademark smile spread across his face, but Christina didn’t miss the wordless communication between the two men. Most likely, Reece was reporting the Kennedys’ accident and the one in front of her home to the police officer.

Jack tried to smile reassuringly, but the motion was awkward and stiff and not his usual easy expression. He put the truck in gear and inched forward until they could pull off to the side of the road. By the time they got out of the truck, Reece was waiting for them.

The short walk to the hospital proved frightening. All around them, victims of the bushfire slowly made their way to the emergency entrance. An elderly couple helped a younger man limp toward the hospital, one foot and both hands badly burned and obviously painful. A young mother tried to calm her two terrified children as she searched the crowd for someone, possibly her husband, and all around them, people covered in soot helped the injured and bewildered victims of the bushfire.

A father called for help as he tried to carry two young children with burned feet, his own feet badly injured. Jack and Reece both turned to Christina, seeming unwilling to leave her but unable not to help someone so obviously in need.

"I'll be right behind you," she said. Both of them smiled grimly before heading directly for the man and his family. Christina stayed close, sensing the need in Jack and Reece not to leave her alone. Or maybe it was her own emotions messing with her head, but she didn't want to be alone right now, and sticking close to friends seemed more important than lining up for medical attention a few minutes faster.

As they approached the injured man, Christina realized there was a woman limping behind him, her feet also burned, a young baby clutched to her chest. She'd been crying, her face streaked with black soot and cleaner tracks where the tears had washed away the grime.

"We didn't know." The words were quiet, filled with anguish. "We didn't know."

Christina tried to think of something to say but seemed unable to find words of comfort under these circumstances. She wrapped her good arm around the woman's shoulders.

"I'm going to try and help take some of the weight off your feet. Are you okay to hold the baby?"

The woman nodded. She couldn't have been any older than Christina, maybe even a few years younger, yet here she was in the middle of a natural disaster trying to protect her three young children.

"We didn't know. The baby has been crying for days." She said the words with difficulty, her throat obviously raw and painful. "The radio reports said the fire was heading in the other direction." Her breath caught on a sob. "We didn't know." Tears tracked down the young woman's face again. Christina did the only thing she could. She held the woman tighter and continued the slow, painful progress to the hospital emergency entrance.

Jack and Reece each carried a young child and helped the father to walk.

As they walked past the accident, Christina averted her eyes, unable to bear witness to more tragedy. Even the quick glance she'd had of the crumpled metal remained behind her eyelids. More death, more destruction, more painful agony for the survivors.

When they reached the other side of the accident, cars were parked haphazardly all over the road, making it necessary for them to weave through the vehicles. It was very slow going, but eventually, they reached the hospital triage area that had been set up on the lawn in front of the emergency entrance. Almost every space was filled with burn victims, many in terrible pain, waiting as the more severe injuries were treated first. Several ambulance sirens could be heard in the distance as well.

A woman approached them as soon as their small party stepped onto the lawn. She wore a name tag, but with eyes still blurry from the smoke, Christina was unable to read it.

"How old is the baby?"

"Nearly six weeks," the young mother answered in a strained and raspy voice.

"Can you walk to the door over there?" When the young mother nodded, the nurse continued. Turning to Christina, she said, "We need to assess the children first. Can you help her?"

"Of course."

The nurse quickly looked over the other two children, a look of anguish crossing her face momentarily before she resumed her professional mask. With all the suffering going on around them, it seemed pretty easy to forget the medical people were affected by this tragedy, too. Christina found herself marveling at the training and professionalism that kept doctors and nurses doing their jobs when it would be much easier to give in to despair.

Reece moved to her side. "Vanessa," he said to the woman beside her, "Your husband wants me to carry you and the baby into the hospital. Jack has the kids. We'll get there much faster."



The young woman glanced at her husband and then nodded her head slowly. Reece bent and easily lifted the woman and her baby into his arms, then immediately strode toward the door the nurse had indicated. Jack was just a few steps behind, the nurse beside him.

“Thank you,” said a quiet voice. Christina glanced at the man trying to limp toward the same door. She’d only just wrapped her good arm around his waist when Jack and Reece returned. They lifted the man between them and headed back into the hospital, returning to her side a few moments later.

Christina smiled at both of them, a little surprised by the way her vision blurred. Her eyes watered, and her head had begun to pound some time ago, but she’d been so involved with getting the family to safety she hadn’t realized just how much her head really hurt. She lifted her shoulders, opening her mouth to drag in a big lungful of air, but it felt wrong somehow, the cleansing breath she sought eluding her. She shook her head and tried again.

## Chapter Three

Reece didn't like Christina's color. He hadn't really noticed it under all the soot and ash, but her skin was very pale, and her lips seemed to have a bluish cast to them. As he and Jack approached, she shook her head, her body swaying as she tried to compensate by stepping sideways.

They'd barely made it to her side before her legs gave out and she crumpled. Reece caught her before she hit the ground, but he cursed a blue streak when her injured hand wedged between their bodies. Even unconscious, she moaned in pain.

Jack helped him to rearrange her in his arms, and then they turned toward the emergency room door, determined to get her immediate help. A nurse approached them quickly.

"What happened?" she called.

"She seemed fine, but then she just collapsed." Reece heard the bewilderment in Jack's voice and shared it. Moments ago, Christina seemed perfectly healthy except for the burn on her hand, and now, she seemed at death's door. Panic threatened to overwhelm him, but he ground his teeth together and tried to concentrate on the nurse's instructions.

Reece carried Christina into the overcrowded hospital, weaving and dodging in between patients and staff to finally reach a spare chair. There were no beds available, and the nurse instructed him to sit in the lounge chair and hold Christina upright so they could attach an oxygen mask.

"It looks like smoke inhalation, but we'll need to wait for the doctor and probably X-rays before we can be certain. The oxygen will

help.” The nurse lifted Christina’s burned hand. The fingers had swollen and now looked like fat, red sausages trying to split their skin. “For the most part, this burn isn’t too bad. She has a couple of spots that look like full-thickness burns, but the rest is fairly minor. I’m going to dress it with a temporary bandage until the doctor can have a look.” She grabbed several sterile dressings and carefully wrapped a bandage so Christina’s fingers no longer touched. “Does she have any preexisting respiratory or medical conditions?” Reece glanced at Jack, noting the same look of frustration that he felt on his own face.

“We don’t know,” he said, shaking his head in disgust. He’d known Christina for a long time and had always planned to get to know her better, but their friendship had never quite moved that extra step. The nurse fiddled with Christina’s oxygen settings for a moment, and then she melted back into the chaos that was the emergency room in this small regional hospital.

Fortunately, within minutes, Christina’s color improved, her lips no longer purple, her skin a more natural hue. She seemed to sleep peacefully in his arms as they waited for a doctor. Hundreds of people moved through the area, a seemingly endless stream of injured and ill patients needing attention. Even in the middle of all the noise, ambulance sirens could still be heard approaching the hospital.

A young child screamed at the top of his lungs, the sound penetrating even the dulled hearing Reece had experienced since the fire’s fury. An older man shuffled across the crowded area, his eyes bleary and his spine bent but determination obvious in every step as he grabbed a bottle of water from a cart and returned to his wife’s side. People moved every which way, the crowded area a blur of dull grays and movement.

A little girl crawled under the bed beside them, her face streaked with tears, fear obvious in every jittery movement. Jack moved away to speak to the occupant of the bed and then lowered himself to the floor and spoke to the frightened child. With all the mechanisms

underneath, the medical bed was an unsafe place to hide, and Jack patiently spoke to the child. Eventually, he convinced her to come out. The child climbed into his embrace, and her slender arms wrapped around Jack's throat in a choking hold.

Reece watched in awe as his best friend, a man he thought of as a brother, soothed the child and eventually settled her sleeping form next to her mother on the bed. Reece and Jack had always been close, but until this very moment, Reece wouldn't have been able to define their relationship. Pride and respect for his closest friend swelled at the same time that tears blurred his vision, catching him by surprise.

He blinked rapidly, embarrassment and shock holding him immobile. He'd spent his whole life convincing people he was an average Aussie larrikin, and not even a tragedy as big as this bushfire was going to ruin his hard-won reputation.

He closed his eyes, feigning sleep, noting with relief that Christina's breathing seemed less labored, less difficult, and she seemed to have relaxed into his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Jack tried to stay close to Christina and Reece but kept out of everyone's way. Not an easy task. A nurse had dressed Christina's burn, checked her breathing, and disappeared into the crowd. It felt like hours before a doctor finally approached them. Christina's color and breathing had improved while on the oxygen, and she'd been in and out of consciousness a few times.

The doctor used a stethoscope to listen to her chest for a moment and then asked Reece to try to wake her. Reece looked down at the woman he held in his arms.

"Chris, time to wake up. The doc needs to ask you some questions."

The woman in his arms opened her eyes groggily and quickly slammed them shut against the light.

“Owww,” she complained in a husky, cracked voice muffled by the face mask. “Can I answer questions without opening my eyes?”

“Of course,” the doctor said kindly. “How does your head feel?”

“Like I’ve got a killer hangover.” The doctor leaned forward, examining and pinching the skin on Christina’s arms, and then smiled reassuringly. Jack felt relief pour through him.

“Chris, you’re a little dehydrated, so we’re going to get an IV line going.” The doctor glanced at Reece, smiled, and then turned his attention back to Christina’s hand. Unwrapping the bandage carefully, he examined the injury closely and then asked, “Any other medical issues I need to know about? Diabetes? Asthma? High blood pressure or heart disease? Anything that could make a burn like this more serious?”

She shook her head no, so the doctor grabbed her medical chart and made a few quick notes. “Your breathing seems to be better with the oxygen, so I want you to keep the mask on for a while longer. At this stage, we’ll wait and see how the next few hours go before ordering an X-ray. A nurse will be along shortly to clean and re-dress this burn. Do you need any medication for the pain?” Christina nodded her head tiredly and thanked the doctor.

The doctor then turned his attention to Jack and Reece.

“Any medical issues for you two?” he asked as he held the stethoscope to Jack’s chest.

“No, just a bit too much smoke,” Reece answered for both of them. The doctor quickly checked them over and nodded in agreement.

“Sounds okay, for the moment. Let somebody know if that changes for any of you.” He waved at a person weaving through the crowd and then moved to the next patient. A woman made her way to them and handed over a large jug of water and three disposable cups.

A few minutes later, a nurse handed Christina some medication, advised her to swallow the tablets with plenty of water, hooked her up to an IV line, and left just as quickly as all the other medical staff

they'd seen. Within fifteen minutes, Christina fell into a comfortable sleep. Signaling his intention to Jack, Reece shifted carefully so he could lower Christina into a more comfortable position. She turned onto her side, her knees bent so she lay across the lounge chair. He grabbed a blanket and carefully slipped it under her head as a pillow. Seemingly unable to sit still any longer, Reece spoke to Jack briefly before heading outside the hospital.

\* \* \* \*

Sitting on the floor beside Christina's makeshift bed, Jack held her uninjured hand and silently lent his strength to the sleeping woman. Reece had gone back to the truck in an attempt to park it somewhere closer to the hospital. He'd been gone for more than an hour, so Jack didn't really like Reece's chance of success.

Someone had switched on a large television suspended from the ceiling in the corner of the room. When the news first reached the television stations, Jack felt numb. Endless images of destruction flashed across the screen. Aerial footage showed massive fire fronts and the total destruction of many homes and businesses. The number of victims already confirmed dead was staggering and continued to rise as he watched.

A woman appeared on the screen, her clothes ragged, her hair singed, and her face covered in soot and tears. She cried quietly as the interviewer tried to ask questions about her family's miraculous escape and horrendous injuries from the firestorm. The woman barely held back sobs as she tried her best to answer, but the live interview ended when the reporter could no longer hold back her own tears.

Jack felt his throat tighten at the woman's obvious distress. His neighbors, his friends, their entire town—every person he and Reece and Christina knew was affected by this tragedy. The community where they'd grown up, where they'd lived their entire lives, was gone, nothing left but a pile of twisted metal and white-gray ash.

Everything he owned he now carried in his truck. And he wasn't the only one. Thousands of people were now homeless with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, and still the fires raged, destroying everything—people, homes, families, entire towns and communities.

Jack held Christina's hand to his cheek, and, for the first time in his adult life, he cried.

\* \* \* \*

Reece made it back to the truck eventually. Everywhere he went, someone needed help. He'd carried several injured people back to the hospital including a family with four children, all of whom had burns of varying degrees. The fire hadn't given them any warning, and they'd had to flee their suddenly burning home. The children had been distressed and terrified, and he'd had difficulty carrying them without crying himself. Surely, this had to be as close to hell on earth as a person could come.

Finally, he was able to turn the truck around and find a more circuitous route toward the hospital. He'd checked the back of the truck to make sure nothing was smoldering and was relieved to find the camping gear and essentials they'd packed were in fairly good condition, if a little banged up.

It had taken him nearly three hours, and when he got back to the hospital, it was to find Jack holding Christina's hand and staring at the television.

Complete and utter devastation. Nothing was left anywhere. The aerial view showed only blackened metal and powdery ash. Everything, *everything* was gone.

And the death toll was staggering.

Impotent anger filled Reece. He walked back out of the hospital room, realizing he needed to do something constructive to get his temper back under control.

Resisting the urge to put his fist through a wall, he headed back into the crowd to help carry more injured into the hospital.



## Chapter Four

*She was completely surrounded by flames, twisting, turning, desperately searching for escape, her only companion a hideously burned and blackened body. Half of the face was missing, so the teeth grinned at her in demented glee. A blackened arm pointed accusingly at her. She felt the inferno's intensity, the heat of the blaze, and she screamed as every inch of her skin and clothes caught fire. The circle of flames around her fell back then, and she saw them. All of them. Burned, charred, twisted beyond recognition were the bodies of all of her neighbors, all of her friends, every person she'd even known. She screamed and tried to close her eyes but realized her eyelids had burned away, leaving her unable to shield herself from the horrifying images. She stood in the middle of a blackened moonscape surrounded by the grizzly scene, screeching in terror as the flames consumed her.*

Christina woke from her pain-induced sleep with a scream working its way up her parched and scratchy throat. It took a moment to get her bearings, and then she was ridiculously grateful for the croaky voice because it stopped her from screaming out loud and waking Jack. He'd fallen asleep slouched on the floor beside her.

He seemed completely covered in soot. His clothes were ripped and filthy and exhaustion etched deeply into his face. His hair was singed and dirty and looked like he'd repeatedly run his hands through it in agitation.

And he held her uninjured hand protectively.

Glancing around, she realized she lay on a couch that had been dragged into a ward of the hospital. She wasn't even sure how or why

she was here. Her only certainty was that Jack and Reece had protected her at her most vulnerable. They were probably the reason she was alive at all.

“Nice to see you awake,” a deep voice said from behind her. She smiled a little as a handsome face came into her blurry line of vision. She might not have been able to see him clearly, but she would recognize Reece’s voice anywhere.

Her eyes watered the entire time she held them open, and the sting eventually overcame her need to see, so reluctantly, she closed them. She could feel the tears running down her face, and she tried to wipe them with her injured hand, regretting her movement almost instantly. Whatever pain relief they’d given her was starting to wear off, and as much as she hated taking medications, she wished for some now. Her hearing still felt strange, and the oxygen tube up her nose felt very uncomfortable. Feeling more vulnerable than she could remember, she clasped more tightly to the hand that held hers.

Then another deep, gentle voice soothed her. Jack told her she was safe and everything would be all right. Strong fingers rubbed gently over the back of her uninjured hand, and another hand stroked the sensitive skin around her ankle and calf, lulling her into relaxing a little. She heard a woman’s voice talking somewhere near her but was unable to understand the words, and then she forgot what she was trying to think as a warm rush of calm enveloped her, and she slid back into oblivion.

\* \* \* \*

“Looks like she’ll be asleep for a while,” the nurse said as she checked Christina’s temperature and blood pressure. “Maybe you should take a break, get yourselves cleaned up. I’ve been told volunteers are set up at the front of the hospital serving food and handing out clothing. Maybe you could grab some clothes for her, too.”

They both glanced at Christina as she slept peacefully, practicality warring with stubborn emotion as each of them decided what to do.

“Go on,” Reece said, understanding Jack’s reticence to leave her alone in a hospital with too many patients. “I’ll be here to keep an eye on her.”

Jack stretched his legs out in front of him, feeling far older than his thirty-two years. As if to sway his decision, his stomach rumbled very loudly. The nurse smiled kindly.

“She looks like she’d wear a woman’s size large,” she said helpfully.

Jack awkwardly clambered to his feet, feeling uncoordinated and shaky, a sensation so foreign to him that he gritted his teeth and forced his body to move. Anger fueling his movements, he somehow found the energy to walk out of the hospital and into the daylight. The sky looked dirtier, darker now with haze from the bushfires than it had been several hours earlier when they’d first reached the hospital.

Following the crowd, Jack joined the group waiting for food from the barbeque. Almost everyone was still covered in thick, black soot, and it took him a moment to realize he knew a few of the people around him. Relieved to see that he and Reece and Christina weren’t the only ones to escape their doomed hometown, Jack spent several minutes talking to neighbors and friends, trying to get an indication if anyone else had managed to survive.

Seeing one of his neighbors moving slowly across the lawn, he hurried to catch up.

“Reg,” he called as he moved up behind him. His oldest friend, both in age and in years known, turned to him, relief and delight written on his face.

“Damn good to see you, mate.” Reg grabbed Jack’s hand to shake it firmly. “Thought I’d lost you for sure. Is Reece with you? Is he okay?” Seeing the emotion cloud Reg’s face, Jack squeezed his hand gently before letting go.

“Reece is fine. He’s sitting with Christina Andrews at the moment.”

“Christina? Mavis Andrews’s daughter? I thought someone said she’d moved back before Mavis died, but I wasn’t sure. Is she all right?”

“Smoke inhalation and burned her hand, but otherwise, she’s okay.”

“That’s good,” Reg said. “One more person to get out alive.” The old man pulled a small notebook from his breast pocket and added their names to the list he’d been keeping. He showed the rest of the names to Jack. It wasn’t a long list, but he saw some familiar names, and though he was relieved some had survived, he worried more for the ones who were missing. Reg looked around him thoughtfully. “They’re handing out clothes over there. You should probably go over and get a few things while you can. No guessing how many people are going to need the help.”

Jack placed his hand on Reg’s shoulder reassuringly.

“Thanks, mate. The TV news is saying our town is gone. Any idea what you’re going to do now?”

Reg looked at him with red, watery eyes. “Guess I’ll go visit my sister up north while things here get sorted. Heard someone say the army was setting up tents on the local sports field, but camping rough just doesn’t have the same appeal to me these days.”

Jack nodded, relieved that Reg at least had somewhere to go. He’d worried the eighty-three-year-old would struggle with his health while their township tried to recover and rebuild.

He grabbed a few sandwiches, two bottles of water, and a bottle of juice and headed over to the area where volunteers were helping bushfire survivors who had nothing but the clothes on their backs.

He grabbed a change of shirt for himself, an extra for Reece, and some clothes for Christina, relieved to find underwear and toiletries had been donated by a local supermarket. A volunteer helped him get the clothes and toiletries for Christina into a plastic bag and pointed

out a rapidly growing pile of dirty and damaged clothing, where he could discard his own fire-damaged clothes. He kept his jeans and boots—they were dirty but not badly damaged—but discarded the rest, knowing they were beyond salvage. He hoped the things they'd packed in the truck weren't damaged. It would be nice if he'd managed to salvage a few of his own clothes. It felt good to be wearing a clean shirt, though, even if it was secondhand. Another volunteer had suggested he grab a couple of jumpers and a jacket in Christina's size in case the weather turned cold, as it was apt to do this time of year. Stifling heat one day, freezing cold the next had been a weather pattern he'd grown used to, but until now, he hadn't really appreciated how easy it had been to adjust to the weather when he had an entire wardrobe of clothes.

He ran into a few more neighbors and pointed them in Reg's direction so they could be added to his list. The more people who knew he had a list, the more chance they had of knowing at least the ones who'd survived.

Anxious to get back to Christina before she woke, he headed back into the hospital. The television in the foyer again showed aerial footage of what was left of their town—basically nothing—just small piles of debris covered in white ash. The school, the police station, the local pub, heritage-listed buildings that had survived countless bushfires in the last hundred years were all gone. The very essence of their hometown had been erased, and Jack wondered if it could ever recover from such devastation.

Jack closed his eyes when footage of the Kennedys' car accident flashed onto the screen. Already, the images were burned to his brain, and he took deep breaths as he tried to pull his rampaging emotions back into his control. Anger flooded his system, but somehow, its impotence seemed even more depressing.

Coming back into the ward where Christina slept on her makeshift bed, he waved to the nurse and then settled his packages between the lounge and the wall to keep them out of the way. He sat back onto the

cold floor, near her feet, and laid a protective arm over her leg, noticing Reece had claimed her hand while he'd been gone. Carefully, he tried to get comfortable, without getting in anyone's way, and tried to catch some sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Christina finally woke without a headache. She opened her eyes slowly, not willing to risk the light jarring her oversensitive eyeballs. Reece and Jack were both still there, one holding her hand, one stroking her leg. She risked moving slightly to get a closer look. They'd cleaned up a little, and she thought they might be wearing different clothes, but exhaustion still shaded their faces. She suspected that, like her, they'd spent the last few nights monitoring the local bushfires, ready to defend their homes if needed. It hadn't done any of them much good in the end, though. The fire that destroyed everything had come from the other direction, a fire they'd known nothing about until it fell on them.

A volunteer hurried into the ward handing out sandwiches and juice. Christina accepted the food and tried to gently extricate her hand without waking her exhausted rescuer.

He woke anyway.

"Hi, beautiful," Reece said, a small smile creasing his face. "Feeling a little better?"

She nodded cautiously, again unwilling to move quickly for fear of jarring her body and the headache returning.

A nurse, seeing that she was awake, hustled over to ask how she was feeling, quickly took Christina's vitals, and then asked a series of questions.

Her last question was a little disconcerting.

"So, if we discharge you today, do you have anywhere to go?" Christina shook her head, glancing at Reece for confirmation.

"No worries," Reece said, "we'll take care of her."

“You’ll need to be able to come back to the hospital to get the burns checked and the dressing changed every day.”

“Not a problem,” Reece said confidently.

“Okay.” The nurse nodded approvingly. “I’ll speak to the doctor, and if he says it’s all right, we’ll give you some medication and instructions, and you can get out of this overcrowded place for a while.”

Christina was very much looking forward to getting off this makeshift bed. It wasn’t that the couch was uncomfortable. It was just that she wasn’t used to sleeping up against a wall, and trying to roll over had proven very awkward. She longed for her own comfortable bed and felt tears well again as she remembered everything she’d ever owned was lost.

She lifted the blanket to assess exactly what she was wearing, only to realize she wore only a hospital gown and underwear. At this stage, she couldn’t even be sure it was her own underwear. Wasn’t that a depressing thought?

Reece must’ve sensed her concern, because he stood up and retrieved a couple of plastic bags from behind the couch.

“Jack picked these for you, so blame him if they’re the wrong size, okay?” he said with an infectious happy grin. Christina lifted her good hand to take the bags from him. She placed them on the floor beside her, pushed herself into a sitting position, and awkwardly opened the bags to see the contents. Inside one was a five-pack of brand-new cotton underwear, a toothbrush, toothpaste, and soap. The other bag held jeans, T-shirts, and jumpers, all looking to be her size. The clothes were obviously secondhand but were in very good condition, and Christina had never been happier to see a pair of jeans and a T-shirt in her life.

“Thought we’d stop at a supermarket and see if they’ve got any shampoo left on the shelves and grab anything else we’re going to need for a few days.”

It was then Christina realized that she didn't even have her wallet. She didn't have her driver's license, passport, or credit cards, and she couldn't access her bank accounts without some form of ID. And, of course, she couldn't get a copy of her license without showing proof of who she was. She didn't even have a family member who could vouch that she was who she claimed.

The enormity of her situation began to overwhelm her, and she was again on the verge of tears when two strong, warm men sat on either side of her and gently held her in their embrace.

"It's okay, babe," Reece whispered soothingly. "We'll take care of you."

"Trust us, Christina," Jack urged confidently. "Everything will work out."

It felt so good to be held like this, to have somebody to rely on, besides herself. Six months ago, her mother had died painfully and slowly from cancer, and Christina had held herself together simply because there had been no one left to pick her up. She'd stood alone at the funeral, not feeling close enough to any of her mother's friends to seek comfort and no longer in touch with any of her own friends. Reece and Jack had been there, but back then, they'd just been guys she'd gone to school with a long time ago. Despite their offers, she hadn't felt comfortable leaning on either of them at the time. She'd run into them pretty regularly since but always as friends. Nothing romantic had ever happened.

It felt really special to have these two gorgeous guys looking out for her now, so she stayed safe and warm in their embrace as she relaxed and fell again into a comfortable sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, flanked on either side by her handsome protectors, Christina walked out of the hospital. She'd been given medication for the pain and antibiotics to protect her against infection,



which could be a serious complication with burns. She'd also received a very stern lecture on what she could and couldn't do for the next few days. Her companions convinced the doctor she was in good hands, and they'd helped her to get dressed—a new and embarrassing experience for Christina—and then escorted her back to the truck.

She hadn't really given it much thought until now, but the back of the truck had a huge storage area that contained the essentials Jack and Reece had been able to get out before their homes were destroyed.

"We managed to save all of our camping gear, some clothes, building tools, laptop computers, and financial records, so we've fared better than most," Jack said as he held the door open for her. Christina's ears perked up at the mention of computers. She'd run an eBay store from her home, and she'd been wondering how she would be able to let her customers know about her fire problems and organize refunds if needed. That was assuming, of course, she'd be able to figure out how to access her bank accounts without ID.

"So, where are we going?" she asked the guys as Jack shuffled her into the middle seat of the truck's cabin.

"I thought we should head over to the local football field, see who we can find, and figure out what the plan is with the relief effort."

"Yep. We don't want to be listed as missing," Reece said, smiling grimly.

"And," Jack said, glaring at Reece and then rolling his eyes, "find out when we can head back home to assess the damage."

Jack jumped into the driver's seat, and Reece climbed in the other side, sliding his arm across the back of the seat and massaging the tight muscles in Christina's neck. She let her head hang forward a little, closing her eyes to better appreciate the heavenly feeling. Jack started the truck and very casually slid his hand onto her thigh, gently stroking up and down the top of her leg. It felt so nice to be the center of their attention that she squashed the little voice telling her it was wrong to accept such intimate caresses from two different men at the

same time. At this moment, it felt right, and she didn't want them to stop.

The drive to the local sports field took less time than it did to find a place to park the truck. Reece slid from his seat and held open his arms to help her out. It was difficult to maneuver with her hand tightly bandaged, and she accepted his assistance gratefully. She didn't miss how quickly Jack claimed her uninjured hand to walk with her, and she was a little worried she may be caught in the middle of male posturing. She took a quick glance at Reece, relaxing slightly when she realized he was grinning at them and not showing signs of jealousy.

Good grief! What was she thinking? They were just being protective. They'd rescued her from the bushfire where she'd lost everything, and now, they felt responsible for her. That was all. Their caressing touches were merely meant as comfort, nothing more.

She glanced at them one at a time. They were both tall and slender although Reece had always been a little more muscular compared to Jack's sleeker, more athletic frame. Jack's hair looked golden light brown in the sunlight but was more a sandy blond color underneath all the soot, whereas Reece's hair was much darker, a deeper brown with a touch of auburn.

They both had rugged, handsome features, gorgeous, liquid eyes, and lips that were made for kissing. She knew for sure that they never had trouble attracting women by the truckload.

Yep, she thought, as if they'd want me—a socially awkward twenty-seven-year-old who's too tall and too wide to be considered elegant or feminine. These guys were drop-dead gorgeous, and she was the girl nobody noticed.

At least, she thought, a salve to her pride, they're both taller than I am. That had to count for something. Mentally rolling her eyes at her silly contemplation, she tried to set aside her confusing thoughts and concentrate on more serious matters.

They found what seemed to be a central area where volunteers busily worked to try and provide as much assistance to those most in need. Christina felt like a bit of a fraud. Sure, she'd lost her home and her business and every other material thing she'd owned, but she wasn't trying to care for young children or deal with the loss of a loved one. So many of the people around her had lost far more in the fire than she had, and she felt both relieved and a little sad that she'd had so little to lose. Her house could be rebuilt and her stuff replaced, but the unexpected and violent loss of a loved one was an open wound that never really healed.

She glanced at both her guys—well, she could think it as long as she didn't believe it—and their eyes reflected her own emotions. Neither of them looked comfortable asking for help when others needed it so much more.

They made their way over to a table that displayed a handwritten sign that said "Please register here."

Jack stepped forward to give their names, turning to Christina when he was asked for her mobile number. Her phone had been on her hip when she'd jumped into the dam, so Jack gave them his number as a contact and made arrangements for them to set up their camping equipment at the far end of the sports field, letting families and those more in need get the positions closer to amenities. Finally, he asked whether anyone knew when they might be able to return to their homes to survey the damage. Nobody could answer that.

## Chapter Five

“It’s kind of hard to believe this is the sports field where we used to play football,” Reece mused as they sat in front of their tent a couple of days later. Everywhere they could see stood tents of various shapes and sizes, many of them provided by the army to help house as many people as they could.

“I remember watching some of the games when I was in high school.” Christina smiled fondly at the memories. They’d been good days. Back then she’d been surrounded by close friends and loving family, and her future had been full of dreams.

“Hey, babe, why the sad smile? You must be remembering how many times Jack dropped the football.” Jack threw the rolled-up sleeping bag at Reece, aiming for his head. Reece managed to dodge the missile and laughingly added, “And he wasn’t much good at passing either.”

Jack laughed good-naturedly, and Christina found herself relaxing a little as they horsed around. Their laughter attracted the attention of some children who’d been in the area, and they came over to see the adults who were able to laugh while everyone else seemed so serious.

Christina watched with pride as the guys grabbed a football and quickly put together two teams of kids to play a game. With a small jolt of guilt, she realized these kids were probably hurting just as much as everyone else but without the maturity or experience to understand just how much their lives were about to change.

Reece and Jack had seemed to understand and now helped these kids cope a little by providing a sense of normalcy in the middle of such extraordinary circumstances. At the same time, it gave their

parents a little space to do their own grieving without having to hide it from their kids.

As she sat and watched the game that grew bigger every time another group of kids discovered the fun, she realized just how special these guys really were. They'd rescued her, stayed with her at the hospital, and now, they'd taken her in when she had nowhere else to go and no one to turn to. Awed by their selflessness, she hoped one day she'd be able to return their kindness and vowed to herself to find a way.

She'd been a little embarrassed that first morning in the tent when she'd woken plastered against Jack. He'd smiled at her sleepy, confused expression, kissed her chastely on the forehead, and pulled her closer. She'd had the nightmare again and remembered reaching out for something but had quickly gone back to sleep when strong arms had pulled her into a tight embrace. Reece had laughed at them when he'd woken up, lamenting that he'd missed all the fun. Waking in Reece's arms the next morning had been even more embarrassing, but neither of her guys seemed upset by her ability to sleep-crawl into their laps.

Happy that she wasn't causing a problem for their friendship, she still felt a little off balance by the way they both accepted her presence so casually. She hadn't been able to resolve her own feelings about either of them, and every time she convinced herself the three of them shared a platonic friendship and nothing more, one of the guys would throw a possessive arm over her shoulders or grab her for a quick hug, and she was back to being off balance.

The smell of barbeque soon had the kids running back to their parents, hungry and exhausted but smiling for the first time in days. Many parents came over to exchange a handshake and a few words with the Reece and Jack before collecting their kids so they could get them fed and settled in time for bed.

"So much for a little game of football." Jack tried to grumble and then ruined it by smiling widely. Both he and Reece looked happier

than they had in days. Maybe even adults needed time off from worrying, Christina thought. Tomorrow, she'd try to find some activities for the kids who didn't like football.

"Better go wash up so we can have something to eat." Christina smiled at them both.

"You stay put," Jack ordered when she tried to get out of her chair. "We'll be back in a couple of minutes to escort you to dinner."

She smiled, more than a little excited at the thought of being escorted to dinner by two of the best-looking, most generous, most well-liked guys in the country. Too bad dinner meant the barbeque set up by volunteers and was probably going to be a few sausages on bread. She sighed quietly. She'd never thought she'd grow tired of barbeque. Turned out she was wrong.

Lost in her own thoughts, Christina was surprised to find Reece almost in front of her by the time she looked up. His hair was wet and slicked back from his face, and he now wore clean jeans, boots, and a shirt. He looked so handsome, so delicious, that she wanted to climb up his body and inhale the man. The thought had barely coalesced in her mind when Jack entered her vision, and she thought the same about him. Lord, she thought, I'm losing my mind.

Reece smiled at her like he knew exactly what she was thinking, and she managed to give herself away by blushing all the way to her hairline.

\* \* \* \*

After they'd eaten, they wandered back to their tent together.

"So, babe," Reece said as he took her uninjured hand as they walked, "we've been taking bets on whose arms you're going to crawl into tonight. Can you give me any hints?" Shock dissolved into laughter when she realized they were both teasing her. She planted a sassy smile on her face and winked at them both.

"Guess we'll just have to see."

Jack came up behind her, strong arms pulling her back onto his chest.

“Perhaps you can be influenced,” he loudly whispered and then ran his tongue lightly over the shell of her ear. She giggled at the tickly sensation but squeaked a little when another set of arms pulled her into an embrace and started kissing and nibbling on her neck. Laughing harder now, Christina held her arms up in mock surrender.

“Okay, okay, I’ll try to keep to my side of the tent tonight.” She grinned.

Two handsome faces wearing identical expressions regarded her intently.

“Maybe,” said Jack, “we should just both hold you while you sleep.”

Christina laughed a little nervously. Surely, they weren’t serious?

“Sounds like a fair compromise to me,” Reece agreed.

Later, Christina was unsure exactly how she’d managed to get her feet working well enough to make it back to the tent without landing on her face. Their friendly teasing sent rockets of sensation shooting all over her body, making her tingle with awareness of how solidly male they both were, of how they both managed to turn her on with just a look. It took a whole lot of willpower to convince herself they were just messing around and weren’t really serious.

When they got back to the tent, Christina quickly went through her clothes to grab the oversized T-shirt she’d been using as a nightshirt. She’d lost her shyness of getting changed in front of them when Reece had pointed out how they’d seen most of her already, managing to make her blush from head to toe when he’d complimented her on her beautiful *titties*. Only Reece could say something like that and still manage to turn her on. Jack had nodded in agreement, and she’d thrown her pillow at them both. It was very difficult to get dressed or undressed without their help anyway, so modesty seemed misplaced.

Reece helped her lift her shirt off her arms while Jack undid the snap on her jeans and lowered them to the floor, holding her calf gently as he lifted first one leg and then the other. He threw her jeans over the chair in the corner of the tent.

They'd done this the last two nights for her, quickly and efficiently, giving her little time to be embarrassed, but tonight, Jack's gaze lingered on her breasts long enough to make the nipples bead tightly, begging for attention. Reece's hand ran slowly, gently up and down her leg from calf to knee, seeming to learn her shape.

Christina glanced up at Jack a little uncertainly. He smiled and helped her put on the T-shirt.

"You are so beautiful," he said as he leaned forward to graze a tender kiss against her lips.

Reece stood and pulled her into a quick hug before helping her into her sleeping bag. Tingling all over and a little embarrassed to be so turned on by such simple actions, Christina awkwardly rolled onto her side. Moments later, Jack settled his sleeping bag in front of her, laying his head on a pillow to smile at her.

She felt Reece behind her as he settled onto his side and pulled her back toward him, spoon-style. Even through two sleeping bags, she could feel the hard muscles of his chest and abdomen pressing against her back. Her breath quickened when she also noticed the rock-hard erection that pressed between her ass cheeks.

Jack lifted a hand to push a strand of hair out of her eyes and leaned forward to kiss her gently. She quietly moaned a little with excitement, so he deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue gently into her mouth and exploring the warm recess.

Reece held her to him even more closely as Jack gentled the kiss and pulled back.

"Goodnight, Christina," he said a little wistfully. "Sleep now. We'll be here if you need us."

Christina's body zinged with awareness, and she wasn't sure she'd sleep at all tonight. She'd never wanted sex so badly, and here



she was lusting after them both. If she was honest with herself, she'd have to admit she wanted more than just sex, but she wasn't in the mood to examine her motives.

Somehow, though, she did fall asleep and woke early the next morning, relieved she hadn't had the nightmare again. Sometime in the night, she'd managed to roll over, and now, she lay spooned against Jack and faced Reece.

Reece was watching her as she opened her eyes.

"Good morning," he whispered as he leaned in to kiss her lips. "Did you sleep better?"

Smiling shyly, she realized she'd had the best night's sleep she'd had in days, maybe even months. Wrapped safe and warm in the cocoon of their bodies, she'd slept soundly for the first time in a very long time.

Jack's arm tightened a little as he pulled her back against his body and nuzzled her neck.

"Good morning." He sighed into her ear. "I am so comfortable here, I don't think I'll ever let go. You feel so wonderful." Seemingly to prove his point, he pulled her hips back onto his raging erection, grinding his cock slowly against the soft flesh of her ass.

Christina's body immediately started humming with excitement, and she felt wetness gathering between her thighs, the muscles of her pussy beginning to pulse.

"Ah, looks like you're enjoying that," Reece said as he leaned forward to kiss her, pushing his tongue deep into her mouth and tangling it with her own. She moaned a little, and Jack leaned over to bite her ear gently, reminding her in a soft whisper that they needed to be quiet.

"I love your sweet sounds, but show me with your body." Christina felt the zipper to her sleeping bag open, cool morning air momentarily chilling her skin before Jack returned to her, still inside his own sleeping bag.

Reece ran his hands over her hips and her belly, pushing the shirt up past her breasts and over her head, carefully helping her get it over her injured arm.

“They’re even more beautiful than I remember,” he said as he ran his hands up her body to cup her breasts, his thumbs grazing over the stiff peaks.

Jack continued pressing her back onto his erection as his hands roamed over her legs and ass, hooking into the top of her panties, pushing them down her legs, and helping her to kick them off.

Heated embarrassment crept up her neck as she realized she now lay on her side, naked between them, both men still in their sleeping bags.

“Let us show you how beautiful you are,” Jack whispered into her ear, gently nipping the sensitive skin on her neck. Shyly, she nodded her consent.

Reece again captured her lips with his, holding her jaw firmly in his large hand, pressing his marauding tongue more deeply into her mouth.

Jack’s hands moved down her body, lifting one leg over his so her pussy lay open to his attentions. His fingers tangled in her wet curls, circling her clit gently, before he plunged one into her dripping pussy. She squeaked in surprised delight, and Reece pushed his tongue farther into her mouth, still teasing the stiff peaks of her nipples with his clever hands.

As Jack continued to push a finger in and out of her aching pussy, Reece slid lower down her body to pull the stiff peak of her nipple into his mouth. He rolled his tongue around the areola. She moaned again but found a large palm gripped firmly over her mouth. She smiled against the hand and then nipped at the fingers. An evil little chuckle sounded just before Reece returned the favor and bit her nipple. She yelped behind her makeshift gag, and he quickly soothed the pain with his tongue.

Jack began circling her clit with his other hand as more fingers pushed into her dripping channel.

“You’re so wet for us, Christina. Can you feel how much your body wants us both?” Christina whimpered in ecstasy behind Reece’s big hand that still held her quiet. She moved rhythmically against Jack’s hands now, striving for the peak that seemed so tantalizingly close. Reece began to suck strongly on her breast, taking up the same rhythm. The combined sensations on her pussy and breasts and the erotic thrill of Reece’s hand forcefully reminding her of the need to be quiet had her thrashing in their arms, desperate for the orgasm she knew only they could give her.

The sensations were nearly overwhelming as she felt her body climb higher and higher. Heat burst through her, exploding in a shower of sensation. Orgasm ripped through her flailing body, brilliant rainbow colors bursting behind her eyes as wave after wave of pleasure stole her breath. Slowly, her heart rate returned to normal, and completely exhausted, she finally lay still in their arms.

Strong hands gripped her from in front and behind.

“Go back to sleep now, love,” Reece said as he kissed her softly.

“But what about you two?” she asked, feeling rather guilty.

“I doubt I could be quiet, so looks like we have to wait for another time.”

Jack nodded against the top of her head as he pulled her back into his embrace.

“Sleep now, sweetheart,” he said, as Reece pulled her sleeping bag back over her.

Still awash with the lethargy that came from being so thoroughly satisfied, Christina tried to tell herself that what she’d just let them do for her was somehow wrong. Everything she’d been taught about love and life said letting two men pleasure her at the same time was not right, but somehow, she couldn’t convince herself.

It had felt so good, so natural, and now, she felt so safe and protected in their arms. How could that be wrong?

## Chapter Six

Christina woke several hours later as the filtered light from a new day registered in her mind. She felt a little disappointed and maybe a little panicked when she realized she was in the tent all alone. Quickly, she stuck her head out of the door-flap to look for Reece and Jack. She knew she was being pathetic, but after what happened last night, she needed reassurance they were still around.

Reece glanced up from the book he was reading, saw the look on her face, and quickly leapt to his feet. She took a deep, steadying breath as he headed toward her.

“Good morning, sleepyhead. Do you want some help getting dressed?”

Christina nodded. She could feel the worried look on her face but couldn’t displace it.

“Where’s Jack?” she asked in a small voice.

Reece smiled that devilishly handsome smile she so adored.

“Oh, how you wound my male ego,” he said dramatically, making stabbing actions near his heart. Christina found herself laughing despite her discomfort. Reece seemed capable of making her feel better no matter what the circumstance.

Reece pushed into the tent, smiling as Christina backed up a little. Hell, he could probably see exactly what she was thinking, the embarrassment and regret written all over her blushing body. She was still as naked as she’d slept, and he couldn’t seem to take his eyes off her. She knew she was taller than most women, but she had—as her mother used to say—“generous curves” instead of the stick-thin body type fashion considered beautiful and many women strived for.

Reece stepped toward her and when she would've moved back, pulled her gently but firmly into his embrace. He tucked her head under his chin and held her against his muscled chest for a moment. She felt a little stiff at first, embarrassment and fear playing havoc with her mind, but she soon melted against him.

Pulling back a little so he could see her face, he said, "Much better. Don't ever doubt how special you are to both of us. It was wonderful to watch you come apart in our arms last night." When she still looked at him a little nervously, he sat in the chair and pulled her onto his lap, urging her head forward so he could press his lips to hers and very thoroughly prove his point.

His large hands roamed over her unclad body, up and down her spine, over the globes of her ass, and back up to the sides of her breasts. With a small groan, he deepened the kiss. He turned her to face him, urging her legs apart so she could straddle his lap, opening her already dripping pussy to his questing fingers. His tongue and fingers worked her into a frenzy of need and had her shaking in his arms, desperate for his possession.

"Well, looks like I've been missing all the fun."

The voice from behind startled her, and if Reece hadn't been holding her so tight, she may have fallen flat on her ass. She tried to move off Reece's lap, but he held her tight against him, his fingers continuing to tease her sensitive flesh. She had to look over her shoulder to see Jack. She could feel embarrassment and excitement written all over her.

Jack sauntered over to them, took her face in his big hands, and kissed her very thoroughly.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he said as he pinched her on her ass. "We have a surprise for you." Seeing the wary look on her face, he added, "But you can't have it until you get dressed."

She tried to rise, despite the fingers still circling her clit, but Reece didn't release his grip on her until she'd melted around his fingers, her entire body drowning in liquid heat. He pushed her face in

his neck, muffling her groans as the orgasm claimed her, then held her close as she tried to catch her breath.

Reece finally helped her to stand, but not before he grabbed both of her nipples and teased them with tiny rolling pinches that almost had her slithering to the floor in ecstasy again.

Jack grabbed her clothes, and Reece held her shaking body upright so they could get her panties and jeans on, and then Jack found another of his shirts and helped her get her injured hand through the arm hole.

The soft material clung to her shape, clearly outlining her turgid nipples. Both men appreciated the view for a moment before seeming to shake it off and bending to the task of her shoes and socks. It seemed much colder today, so they reluctantly helped her into a jacket that hid her straining nipples from view. Reece snaked a hand into her jacket and tweaked her nipple again with a wicked grin on his face.

“Okay,” Jack said. “First stop, the hospital to get you checked over, and then you get your surprise.”

Despite the remnants of desire still coursing through her body, Christina felt ridiculously excited about getting a surprise, a little like a kid the night before Santa. The trip to the hospital seemed to take twice as long today, when in reality it was probably about the same wait as it had been every day since her injury.

Finally, her dressing changed, she sat in the middle seat of the truck, sandwiched between two guys who had quickly become a very important part of her life. Fear and doubts for the future slithered up and down her spine, but she firmly pushed the thoughts away, determined to enjoy her time with these two very special men.

The farther they got from the hospital, the more excitement she felt. Shops. The chance to buy some clothes and underwear that actually fit and all the little stuff she’d taken for granted, like the soap and deodorant she preferred, and oh, yes, a razor for her embarrassingly hairy legs.

They went with her to sort out her driver's license, both volunteering to officially vouch for her identity, and then they helped her to get access to her bank accounts and order replacement credit cards. She withdrew some cash so she could do some shopping and buy essentials and still have a little left later in case she needed it.

She thought she saw surprise and maybe a little relief on the guys' faces when she led them into a department store to buy her clothes rather than the boutiques and women's clothing stores.

She quickly selected practical clothing for camping outdoors but managed to sneak an elegant nightdress into the pile without the guys noticing. She grabbed some underwear and tried to head into the bra section, but a solid wall of unmovable muscles appeared in her way. Both Reece and Jack shook their heads at her, refusing to let her past.

"It's no use, babe," Reece murmured. "How are you going to get a bra on without our help?"

Jack nodded in agreement.

Sighing in mock defeat and trying to hide her smile, Christina turned toward the toiletries department, secretly pleased they preferred her breasts unbound.

With her shopping finished, they climbed into the truck and headed farther into town. Jack was flat-out grinning as he pulled into the parking lot of a motel. Turning to her with a smile, he winked and said, "We thought you might like to stay in town tonight. Just think, sweetheart, a long soak in a bath, actual beds, coffee, and even lights that don't need batteries..."

Christina grinned back and then threw herself into his arms.

"You hooked me at bath." She laughed as she clambered over him to get out of the truck. He swatted her ass as she wriggled over him, and by the time Reece had them booked in and up to the room, she felt lighthearted, her troubles, for the moment, at least, set aside for another time.

\* \* \* \*

Reece enjoyed the easy camaraderie the three of them had developed in the last few days, and he knew Jack well enough to know he felt it, too. Christina really was an amazing person. He'd watched her with the kids at the camp. She gently encouraged them to draw and paint, helping them if they wanted it and enthusiastically praising their efforts. He'd even seen her talk a couple of youngsters through crying jags, tears for all they'd lost. Somehow, this gentle woman helped them through their grief and fear and had them talking and laughing with the other kids in no time.

And, of course, she had the most perfect ass he'd ever seen, and he could barely wait to grab handfuls of it as he drove his cock into her warm, wet pussy. Even now, he had a serious hard-on that was making it difficult to concentrate on anything besides getting her naked.



## Chapter Seven

Christina practically danced into the motel room. It looked to be a very functional room with a large bed in one corner, a small kitchen area, and an archway into the bathroom. The bathroom seemed quite large in comparison. It held a shower, spa bath, and vanity with a mirror taking up most of the far wall. It was the first time Christina had really had a chance to see her reflection in decent light since the fires and she blinked in horror at what she saw. Her hair had been burned and now hung raggedly across her forehead. Her skin was beginning to peel on her cheeks where it had reddened from the heat, and her eyes still looked red-rimmed and very sore.

What on earth were the guys seeing? They'd made her feel so beautiful, and she'd actually looked like a load of crap. She didn't even want to think about how long the hairs were on her legs.

Reece came into the bathroom behind her, stripping off his clothes as he moved toward the shower.

"I'm just going to have a hot shower and then head out to get some supplies. I thought we might go out for dinner, or"—he quickly amended when he saw her look of dismay—"we could order room service."

She brightened considerably at the thought.

"I'd love room service, as long as it's not barbeque."

"No problem." Reece winked as he began to lower his briefs. She suddenly realized she was standing there panting for him, actually waiting for him to strip off, willing his penis to go hard as she watched. Embarrassed beyond belief, Christina squeaked a goodbye and left the room quickly.

“Coward.” He chuckled as she closed the door.

\* \* \* \*

About twenty minutes later, Christina lowered herself into the hot bath. The water was probably a little hotter than she usually liked, but it felt so good to be able to soak for a while. She laid her head back against the rim of the bath, arranging her injured arm on the edge to keep it dry, and willed her tired muscles to relax. She didn’t even turn on the bubbles. It was just heaven to sit in the slowly cooling water.

A soft puff of air alerted her to the door being opened. Christina peered lazily at Jack from under heavy eyelids.

“Oh, honey, don’t look at me that way,” he admonished, “or I’m liable to forget why I came in here.” He held up a bottle of shampoo and a coffee mug. “Lean forward a little so I can wash your hair.” She did as he asked, and soon, a mug full of warm water cascaded over her head and shoulders. Another mug of water ran forward over her face, water streaming over her closed eyes.

The delicious smell of the shampoo she’d purchased earlier filled the air, and then strong fingers worked it into her hair, massaging and soothing her scalp, sending tingles all over her body. He held a hand over her eyes as he rinsed the shampoo away, only to start the process over again with the conditioner. By the time Jack was finished, she felt so relaxed she’d almost forgotten about her hairy legs.

A large, warm hand reached into the water and gently grasped her ankle, lifted it out of the tub, and looped it over the edge. Christina looked at him questioningly and wondered if he could also read her desire. Her pussy had flooded with hot water when he’d pulled her legs apart, and the delicious sensation was doing delectable things to her insides.

She tried to hide her arousal but figured she must’ve failed when Jack’s smile grew even wider.

“Behave, temptress,” he admonished again. “I’m going to shave your legs. That’s all.”

A little embarrassed by this turn of events, Christina tried to protest, but he shushed her before the words could leave her mouth.

“I found the razor, amongst other things, in your shopping bags and figured it would be pretty awkward to do without your main hand. Now, do you want your legs shaved or not? Personally, I don’t mind them either way.” Smiling wickedly, he lowered his head to her foot and began taking little biting nips at her toes then licking and sucking them into his mouth.

Fighting her rising need and a sense of the ridiculous, Christina closed her eyes and nodded. She’d never been so turned on before, and here was this gorgeous, generous man offering to shave her legs for her simply because she wanted them done.

She shivered all over with need by the time he’d finished carefully shaving her legs from ankle to inner thigh. She’d never realized how erotic something as mundane as removing hair could be when it was done by the right person.

“Okay,”—he held a hand toward her—“time to get out. The water must be freezing by now.” Christina blushed again when she realized he was right. She’d been so caught up in his seductive movements she hadn’t actually noticed the cooling water. She knew her shivering had nothing to do with the temperature.

“Step into the shower quickly so I can rinse any shaving cream we might’ve missed.” Christina did as she he instructed, and Jack held her steady by the elbow of her injured arm as she stood beneath the stinging hot shower spray.

Satisfied that she was properly rinsed, Jack wrapped a large, white towel around her and guided her back into the main room. Just as she sat down onto the bed, the door opened, and Reece came in with a few shopping bags in his arms. He saw her sitting on the bed and smiled seductively.

“So, what have you two been up to while I was away?” he asked with a not-so-innocent expression on his face. He dumped his packages by the door and sauntered over to the bed to sit down next to Christina. The mattress bowed a little, and she tilted toward his strong body.

“Mmmm, I like that shampoo,” he said as he wrapped his arms around her. She lifted a leg slightly to show him the now-hairless expanse. “Oh, and I like what you’ve done with these.” He growled mischievously as he grabbed her leg, lifting the knee toward his body, exposing her throbbing pussy to Jack’s avid gaze.

Reece ran his hand up and down her thigh and calf, admiring the still-damp and newly-hairless limb.

“Now, this is much nicer. Nothing to hide your flawless skin and, oh, I think you might’ve missed a few here,” he said, grinning widely as he rubbed his hand against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, gently grazing his fingers along the swollen lips of her pussy. Christina found it difficult to breathe again. It felt like she’d been wet and wanting them both for days.

Throwing caution away, Christina took a deep breath and acted on the impulses that had nagged her for days. She motioned for Jack to sit on the bed next to her and tried to lift her other leg onto his lap. When he realized her intention, he helped her, leaving her pussy more exposed to their gentle fingers. Reece pulled her head around and thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, sensation skittering all over her when Jack’s fingers found her clit and slowing circled around and around without actually touching. When she would’ve collapsed backward, both men held her up, one of them managing to unhook the towel, leaving it to pool around her waist. Reece’s hand slid up her leg, molding over her soft belly and up to cup the underside of her breast. Awash with sensation, Christina almost didn’t notice Jack slide off the bed until she felt his tongue push into her exposed sex. Almost leaping off the bed from the intense sensations, Christina trembled violently, squirming against their twin assault. Her orgasm

caught her by surprise, throwing her against Jack's mouth as he lapped at her juices. Reece held her close as she rode the storm and then gently lowered her trembling frame to the bed, kissing her softly, soothingly, helping her through the most intense experience of her life.

The loud knock on the door was an unwelcome interruption. Her heart leapt into her throat when she realized her current position would be very clearly seen from the doorway.

"You two go hide in the bathroom," Reece said with a wink. He was the only one of them still fully clothed. "I'll let our dinner in."

Smiling mischievously, Jack stood up and pulled Christina's legs around him, lifting her into his arms, the sensitized flesh of her pussy rubbing against his jean-clad hard on. Christina moaned quietly at the intense sensation and then squeaked a little louder when Reece's hand slapped her ass.

\* \* \* \*

By the time they made it to the bathroom and closed the door, Christina was straining against Jack's solid, almost painful erection, trying in vain to reach the fly of his jeans without falling onto the floor. He pressed her against the vanity and tried to slow down the rapidly growing fire in his belly. His arms shook as he held Christina against the basin. She fumbled one-handed with the zipper on his jeans. Finally, between the two of them, the snap came undone, and his rock-hard erection sprang free. He was just about to plunge into her welcoming heat when the last shreds of his sanity screamed *condom*. He quickly pulled back from Christina, his sudden move almost unbalancing her and toppling her off the vanity.

She looked at him, confusion and hurt in her eyes. Jack stepped back to her and carefully pulled her into his embrace.

"Sweetheart," he said softly, smoothing the hair away from her eyes, "we don't have any condoms in here."

“Oh, hell,” she whispered, “I should’ve thought of that.” He was immensely relieved he’d at least had sense enough to act responsibly and protect her, but he still shook with desire and knew pain etched his features as he tried to calm his raging erection.

Jack took a small step backward so she could put her feet on the ground. As she stood, she gently maneuvered him toward the edge of the tub and pushed him into a sitting position.

Grabbing a couple of folded towels, she laid them on the floor in front of him and, lowering to her knees, grabbed his aching cock in her uninjured hand. He gasped at the unexpected caress as she slowly lowered her head to his solid rod and licked the bead of moisture from its tip. She looked up into his eyes, grinned wickedly, then lowered her mouth onto him, slowly taking him to the back of her throat. Jack’s groan seemed to spur her excitement, and she began a slow, rhythmic sucking on his engorged cock. He jolted a little, accidentally pushing his cock farther into her throat. He tried to pull back, but she swallowed around him, and he felt his control snap. He groaned, and she swallowed again.

The bathroom door flew open, and then Reece was behind her, fingers thrusting deeply into her pussy.

“Oh, babe, I really need to fuck you.” Reece groaned from behind her. “Please say I can.”

Christina lifted her mouth away from Jack’s cock, making a little popping noise as she broke the suction. Looking over her shoulder at Reece, she said shyly, “I’d really like that.”

Reece quickly left the room, returning moments later rolling a condom onto his erection. Christina tried to watch him as she sucked on Jack’s cock once more and squirmed with excitement when Reece knelt behind her and pulled her ass up so she balanced her arms on Jack’s legs with her pussy high in the air.

Positioning himself against what Jack knew was a tight sheath, Reece pushed slowly into her. She stilled as Reece stretched her sensitive flesh, her breathing rapid as he filled her. She groaned

around Jack's cock, regaining her rhythm as Reece began to move in and out of her body. Jack started lifting his cock farther into her mouth in pace with Reece's fucking. Liquid heat coiled through every inch of Jack's body, his excitement reaching excruciating levels as Christina groaned once more. His cock swelled a moment before his cum shot deep into her throat. She continued to suck him as he softened in her mouth, and then she laved his softening member lovingly with her tongue.

Jack lifted her face gently off his cock and pulled her head into his belly, helping to hold her steady for Reece to pound her from behind. He ran a hand over her back and under to her breasts, found the beaded nipple, and pulled and squeezed as she panted and squirmed between them.

## Chapter Eight

She wiggled as pleasure bounced and skittered all over her body.

Reece slapped her ass, riding her hard.

The explosive orgasm held just out of reach, building higher and higher until Reece reached under and grabbed her clit, squeezing hard. The intense pleasure-pain burst through her, shaking her body violently. Reece called her name in a hoarse voice as she felt him swell and explode within her dripping sheath. He pounded into her a few more times before collapsing forward, gently embracing her and pulling them both onto their sides on the tiled floor.

The cool tiles were a welcome relief against her overheated body. Reece's strong arm held her tight against him.

"Good grief, woman." He mock growled. "I don't think I'll ever walk again." Christina smiled a little in relief, pleased she was able to give him the same level of pleasure that he and Jack had given her.

Jack stood over them and offered a hand to get her off the floor.

"Come on, you two. Time for dinner." As he helped her up, he pulled her into his embrace and held her tight. Kissing her tenderly, he gently ran his hands soothingly up and down her trembling back. "You are amazing," he whispered into her ear.

They quickly threw some clothes on, and Jack helped her into the nightgown she'd bought earlier that day. It was a deep emerald, silk-like material that complimented her coloring and hung demurely to her knee, but the slippery fabric fell elegantly over her curves and gently framed her breasts.

They sat at the small kitchen table and ate the meals Reece had ordered. There seemed to be one of everything on the menu, and they



all reveled in the taste of real food, voicing their delight with every new dish. And, of course, Reece ordered dessert, all of them chocolate—chocolate mousse, chocolate cake, and chocolate ice-cream.

Christina giggled with delight. Chocolate was her all-time, absolute favorite, and she'd loudly lamented its absence more than once over the last few days. She dug a spoon into the chocolate mousse, wrapped her lips around it, and moaned. She closed her eyes, grateful to be in chocolate heaven.

Both of the men groaned.

"Sweetheart," Jack said, pain lacing his voice, "please don't do that again."

"Do what?" she asked innocently as she spooned another mouthful of chocolaty sweetness into her mouth.

"That," Reece said as he pulled her from her chair and onto his lap, grinding her ass against his engorged organ.

"Oh." She smiled. Jack took the spoon from her, dipped it back into the bowl, and offered her another mouthful. She opened her mouth and licked the spoon with her tongue, never taking her eyes off Jack's face. Reece ground her against him again and lifted his hands to palm her throbbing breasts, flicking at her nipples with his thumbs. Sensation pooled low in her belly, the combination of the slippery material of her nightdress and Reece's denim-clad erection prickling her skin with heated awareness.

Jack dropped the spoon and stepped over to grab her face in his large hands, licking the chocolate from her lips and then plunging his tongue into her chocolaty mouth. He thrust deeply into her, the force of his desire pushing her harder against Reece's muscular body.

With a growl, Reece stood up, gathered her into his arms, and then dumped her into the middle of the bed. She lay there panting, watching them tear at their own clothes. She barely had time to appreciate their gorgeous bodies and amazingly hard cocks before they both stretched onto the bed, one on either side of her, and began

kissing her all over. Their hands slid up and down her body over the slippery material, multiplying the sensations, learning her shape and her reactions to their touches.

She could feel a sinfully hard cock pressed against either thigh, and she longed to hold them both in her body. She squeaked in surprise when Jack lifted her legs high in the air and settled himself between her thighs. He pushed the nightdress up to expose her dripping pussy to his gaze then positioned his condom-clad cock at her entrance and watched her. Jack didn't move. Just sat on his haunches watching her face. Waiting.

She tried to squirm onto his cock, desperate now to feel him inside her, but Reece held her still in his strong grip until, nearly vibrating with need, Christina realized what he was waiting for.

"Please fuck me. I need you."

Jack plunged into her so hard and fast it took a moment for her to catch her breath. He set a pounding rhythm that probably would've pushed her off the bed if Reece hadn't been holding her safe against his chest. Harder and faster he pumped into her, holding her gaze as he found her clit and worried it with his fingers. Within moments, her body bucked beneath his, cream flooding from her vagina and down the seam of her ass. And still Jack rode her.

Suddenly, he pulled out. Lifting her ass higher into the air, he slathered a cold lubricant against her dark hole. Her muscles jumped and pulsed as he pushed a finger deep into the puckered, pink opening. The burning sensation was quickly overtaken by the extraordinary desire that had her pussy creaming more lubricant that rolled down onto her ass.

"That's it, sweetheart," Jack crooned. "Let us take care of you. Trust us," he said as he pushed the tip of his cock into the tight hole. The burning sensation returned tenfold, but the nerves jumped and pulsed harder, and Reece's fingers found her clit, making her whole body lift off the bed in ecstasy. Jack eased in and out of her ass gently at first and then with more pressure, more speed, more demand.

Just as Christina neared the highest peak, almost ready to fly with her orgasm, he once again pulled out of her body, leaving her shaking with need.

“Don’t worry, babe,” Reece reassured her. “We’re just getting started.”

Whimpering, she let them move her so that she was lying on top of Jack but facing Reece. Jack pushed gently into her ass, murmuring sweet words into her ear as her head lolled to the side, once again in ecstasy.

She felt Jack’s hands grab the inside of her thighs, opening her to Reece, offering her swollen, wet pussy to him. Quickly donning a condom, Reece positioned himself between her thighs and gently pushed into her heated, dripping slit. The incredible thrill of being filled by them both at the same time had her rocking between them, writhing for their complete possession. Carefully, they built a rhythm, Jack almost lifting her ass all the way off his cock as Reece plunged into her pussy and then Jack pushing back into her ass as Reece pulled out of her.

Slowly, they moved inside her. Slowly, they built the friction. Slowly, they drove her to heights of desire she’d never imagined. And effortlessly, they held her there, twisting in ecstatic reaction, striving for completion.

With a tortured groan, Jack began moving more urgently. Suddenly, they were both pounding into her, throwing her over the edge and into the intense orgasm. She growled as sensations she’d never even imagined possible pounded through her. Her body thrashed between them, every muscle pulsing in reaction, flooding her veins with liquid heat, burning completion, and absolute exhaustion.

Reece leaned forward, capturing her lips with his own, tenderly kissing her mouth as he pulled her into a sitting position and sat back, pulling his slowly softening cock out of her throbbing vagina. He kissed her for a long moment, the sweet kiss bringing tears to her eyes. Then he helped Jack roll her onto her side so he could gently

extricate himself from her ass. She rolled farther onto her stomach, exhausted all the way to her bones.

“Come on, babe,” Reece said as he lifted her from the bed and headed for the bathroom. “Let’s get you cleaned up so that you can get some sleep.”

Reece stepped into the shower with her, washing her down quickly and handing her into Jack’s arms and a big, soft towel. Jack guided her sleepy feet over to the bed and pulled back the covers. She lay down on the soft mattress, very grateful not to be sleeping in her sleeping bag tonight, and settled into a comfortable position. Jack sat beside her, gently playing with her hair, pulling it away from her eyes and pushing it back from her face.

Reece came out of the bathroom and slid under the covers to pull her against him, spoon-fashion. She snuggled into his body, needing his warmth and reassurance. She was almost asleep when she felt Jack slide into the other side of the bed, and she reached over to place a possessive arm on his chest, her hand pressed to his heart.

## Chapter Nine

Christina woke sometime later, nestled safely between her men. She stared at the ceiling as she contemplated her current situation. She loved the way they made her feel, how they could turn her on so effortlessly, and she loved the way her body responded to them. It seemed like she was made for them and they for her. She loved their caring ways and how generous they were, not only with her, but with all of the neighbors and friends that they'd met at the camp. She loved everything about them both.

And, as long as she was being brutally honest with herself, she might as well admit she loved them both with a capital *L*. Loved them wholeheartedly, with the type of love that led to weddings and babies and growing old together. It was strange how she was so sure of her feelings after years of casual friendship and only knowing them intimately for such a short time, but she'd already shared more with these two men than she had with anyone else in her lifetime.

Yes, she loved them, but she loved them enough not to tell them. Loved them enough to let them think this was just a bit of fun, a way to blow off steam and reaffirm life after the tragedies of the past week. Loved them both enough not to confess that she loved them both and that being forced to choose between them would break her heart.

Even so, her heart broke a little as she contemplated life without them, but she silently promised she would never hurt them, and when it came time for them to go, she wouldn't stop them.

Pushing closer, she held them to her. They had only a few days here together, and she found herself wishing they would never end.

\* \* \* \*

She awoke with a very hard erection nestled between the globes of her ass and another very stiff rod rubbing against her already throbbing mound.

“Well, hello, sleepyhead.” Jack grinned as he grabbed her hips to grind her more fully against him. “We thought you’d never wake up.”

Reece nuzzled her neck from behind. “Wanna play?” he asked as he sucked her earlobe into his mouth, biting down until she gasped from the erotic pleasure-pain.

Jack snaked a hand down her body, plunging two fingers straight into her dripping pussy. “Mmmm, you’re so wet,” he moaned as he looked over her shoulder at Reece.

“I think that’s a yes,” Reece said, momentarily halting his assault on her earlobe.

“Yes,” she said on a low moan. “Please,” she added for good measure.

She felt cold lubricant squirt onto the seam of her ass, sending shivers down her legs in anticipation of what was to come.

Both blunt heads touched her entrances at the same time, making her gasp a little in fear. Surely, they weren’t going to ram both cocks into her tender flesh at the same time. She shivered again, unsure whether it was lingering fear or thrilled excitement at the sheer eroticism of being held between two solid walls of male as they worked her body into a frenzy.

Reece whispered in her ear once more, “It’s okay, babe. Trust us. We won’t do anything to hurt you.”

She relaxed then, knowing it to be true. Neither of them would harm her in any way. They’d brought her to mind-blowing orgasm again and again in the last twenty-four hours, and she’d felt absolute completion and total exhaustion but never any pain.

As she relaxed, her body melted into theirs and they both pushed into her inch by agonizingly slow inch. The delicious feeling of being skewered by them both had her panting for breath, trying to slow the rapid build of desire and her race toward screaming orgasm.

By the time they were both buried to the hilt in her body, she was unable to contain the raw emotion and absolute feeling of belonging to these two amazing men. Tears threatened, and she closed her eyes quickly to hide her emotions.

\* \* \* \*

Jack pulled back, easing a little out of her body, grabbing her chin as he tried to gauge what was wrong. He didn't think they were hurting her, but he wasn't willing to take the chance and started to withdraw from her pussy. Desperately, she reached out and grabbed him by the hips, forcefully pulling him back into her body, jolting Reece, who moaned loudly as his cock was pushed out of her ass a little and then sucked back in by muscles that were beginning to spasm.

"Christina, sweetheart..." Jack tried to ask her what was wrong, but she cut off his words by capturing his lips with her own and sucking his tongue deep into her mouth. She was moving her body between them, slowly at first and then with more urgency, more desperation, more need. Fire rushed through his veins, making him both stronger and weaker at the same time, and he welcomed the incredible pleasure as every muscle in his body coiled tight. Christina's orgasm broke over her, sending her body into violent spasms, jarring both him and Reece out of rhythm. No longer able to maintain any coordination, they both plunged into her, helpless to stop their reactions as Christina's tight muscles pulled them into release. Her orgasm seemed to go on forever, her entire body shaking violently as burning satisfaction zinged through Jack's mind.

Just as he thought her body replete and beginning to relax, her muscles clenched, and another orgasm pounded through her. Jack felt Reece swell in her body, the extra-tight sensation causing them both to reach their climax at the same time.

The three of them lay there panting. Jack tried to suck in enough oxygen to still the spinning, dizzy free fall such incredible orgasm left behind. He felt himself softening in her body but was loath to let her go. Judging by Reece's failure to move, he was probably feeling the same.

"Sweetheart," Jack finally whispered, "I have to get up so the condom won't spill."

\* \* \* \*

Dread swept through her as she realized she hadn't even thought of protection, so needy for them that she'd been willing to risk unsafe sex. She shivered a little at the self-revelation. She'd never been the risk-taking type. Thank god her men had been thinking clearly enough to don condoms before making love to her.

Reece held her in his strong arms as Jack pulled gently from her body, holding the condom so it didn't slide off his softening cock. A moment later, Reece did the same, slipping from her ass and leaving her feeling bereft.

Jack leaned over and placed a soft kiss on her mouth. "Just give us a minute to clean up," he said. Making sure he had her eye contact he added, "Then we're going to talk."

Christina felt like such a coward. She closed her eyes, and again, tears stung behind her lids. She loved them both. She needed them both, and she craved them both to the very edge of insanity.

In less time than she would've thought, the bed dipped on either side, and she was hauled to a sitting position against the headboard. She opened her eyes to find two very intense sets of eyes watching her closely.



“Okay, babe,” Reece said as he crossed his arms in front of him, “spill!”

She watched Jack roll his eyes at his friend’s lack of tact. Reece had never been comfortable talking about feelings, and all three of them knew it.

With a single finger, Jack gently guided Christina’s face up to his.

“Sweetheart, why were you crying? Did we hurt you?”

Christina’s heart ached that they would think she’d been in pain. She shook her head so violently in denial that she almost unbalanced and tipped off the bed. Lucky for her, two very capable males were looking out for her. She landed in Reece’s lap as he dragged her into his embrace. Jack tried to ask his question again as Reece held her and kissed the top of her head in a very sweet and emotional gesture.

“Sweetheart, why were you crying? You can tell us anything.”

Christina was starting to feel a little like a pouting child, and it began to annoy her that she could be so pathetic, so she tried her best to explain her tears without actually confessing to loving them both.

“I’m sorry,” she began. “I didn’t mean to worry you. It just felt so incredible having you both inside me.”

Still looking pensive, Jack asked, “Incredible, how?”

Christina glanced at him and then shifted to look over her shoulder at Reece, not really sure what they wanted to know.

“Incredible, how?” Jack asked again. “Incredible like—wow, two cocks fucking me at once,” he suggested, distaste clearly written all over his face, “or incredible like—Jack and Reece both loving me at the same time?”

Well, this was it. Should she lie and make what they did feel cheap and dirty, or tell the truth and risk ending something so wonderful?

She must’ve hesitated a moment too long, because Jack sighed impatiently and began to lift himself off the bed. Panic fluttered through her chest.

“Not two cocks,” she said, her voice breaking a little, “two men I care for deeply finding pleasure with me.”

Reece’s arms tightened around her. Jack leaned forward to kiss her lips in tender salute. Pulling back from her, Jack again looked over her shoulder to make eye contact with Reece. She felt Reece nod against her head.

“Do you think deep caring could become love someday?” Jack asked quietly.

Too nervous to answer out loud, Christina nodded warily, never taking her eyes off him. His face split into a huge grin as Reece turned her in his lap to kiss her soundly and very, very thoroughly. When he let her come up for air, he said the one thing Christina had not been expecting. “I love you.”

Christina’s gaze flew swiftly to Jack’s expression. He looked happy. Very happy.

“I love you both,” she blurted, terrified that Jack might turn away and clear the field for his best friend. She loved them both. She couldn’t live without them both, so sure was she of her feelings.

A moment hung, frozen in time as Jack dragged her off Reece’s lap and pressed her to his heart.

“I love you, too,” he said simply.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Christina sat in a scarred plastic chair in the laundromat, watching her clothes tumble around in the dryer. She smiled to herself when she realized her life in recent days had been a lot like those clothes. She hadn’t been sure which way was up, but life had just kept rolling over and over. She wasn’t really sure how she’d ended up here—in love with two men who loved her back—but she was very grateful.

After their conversation, the lovemaking this morning had again brought tears to her eyes. They’d been so loving, so caring, so gentle

that she'd growled in frustration and taken the lead. Both of her men had been a little surprised, very delighted, and very, very satisfied.

Jack must've seen the smile on her face because he pulled her to him for a hug and a kiss that had her panting and wanting more. A few moments later, Reece came in the door, pulled her into his arms, and also kissed her soundly.

As he released her, Christina realized she had an audience. An older lady sitting over near another machine watched her, eyes narrowed and a sour look on her face. Embarrassed to be the insect under the old lady's microscope, Christina tried to ignore the woman but found herself pulling away from both the guys, suddenly worried what other people might think. One woman, two guys—how many people would understand that?

\* \* \* \*

Jack noticed the old lady watching Christina and saw how Christina reacted. He and Reece needed to get her back to the motel so they could work out some of the details of their relationship. He'd never really thought about how others might unfairly judge a woman in a relationship with two men, but he didn't want to see Christina hurt. The three of them needed to make a few plans before heading back to the camp.

They could only stay one more night in the motel as the authorities back home had been organizing buses for tomorrow or the day after to ferry the bushfire survivors up to their homes to see if anything was left. They were all anxious to be on the bus to see for themselves if anything could be salvaged. It hadn't helped seeing television footage of the area. With so many buildings gone, it had been hard to figure out exactly what area they were looking at.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as their laundry was done, Jack hustled them back to the motel, ordering room service for dinner again on their way past the restaurant. Curious as to the cause of his behavior, Reece eyed his friend suspiciously. He knew Jack acted like this when he was planning something. Whether it was their next building job or a party or a holiday, he was always a little hyper. Reece was looking forward to finding out exactly what he was planning this time. He sat at the table, laced his fingers together, and waited.

\* \* \* \*

Seeing Reece's expression, Jack suddenly realized what he was doing. So caught up in planning ahead, he'd forgotten to consult the two other people the future would affect.

Smiling happily and a little more relaxed now, Jack pulled Christina into his arms, tucking her under his chin and holding her close.

"Sweetheart," he said gently, "we need to sort out a few things before we get back to the camp site. I saw the way that woman looked at you at the laundromat."

She sat straighter in his arms and smiled a little sadly.

"Judgmental morons," Reece ground out, clearly disturbed by the thought that Christina would bear the brunt of society's attitude. "Apparently, in this world, two men can bang the same woman, but one woman can't love two men at the same time."

"That about sums it up," Christina said quietly, sounding defeated. Jack hugged her closer.

"Sweetheart, we want to protect you. Maybe you should marry one of us," he suggested, glancing quickly at Reece to make sure he was with him on this one. Reece nodded enthusiastically.

Christina laughed quietly and said, "So, how do we decide? Do we flip a coin or something?"

Pulling out of Jack's embrace, she led him over to the table and they sat down with Reece. She seemed to want to grab a hold of both of their hands, but with her injured hand, it was too awkward, so she settled for holding Jack's hand and looping her knee over Reece's leg under the table.

"Let's think this through for a second, okay? Jack, if I marry Reece, I can't show affection to you in public, you can't introduce me as your wife, you wouldn't even be able to lay claim to any children we may have." She blushed a little at the thought of children. They hadn't really talked about anything like that yet. "And it would be the same for Reece if I married you. It's not fair, not on any of us."

Two pairs of eyes watched her closely as they considered her words.

"So, how do we protect you?" Reece asked, bewilderment clearly telegraphed in his body language.

Shrugging a little, she replied simply, "You don't."

"What do you mean 'we don't'?" Reece growled, doing his best caveman impression.

"I mean," she said, eyeing him sternly, "that I don't care what others think of me, and I won't let them dictate who I can and can't love."

Floored by Christina's softly spoken words, Jack sat very still at the table. Slowly, carefully choosing his words, he leaned across the table and ran his rough, calloused fingertips over her face.

"Sweetheart, you love us enough to ruin your reputation," he pointed out, feeling a smile filled with wonder and awe at her strength of character crease his face. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She nodded confidently, and suddenly, it was that much clearer. Jack nodded in understanding. Yes, she loved them both, and she wasn't going to hide it. Denying her love tainted it, made it less than it was, and she wouldn't let that happen.

## **Epilogue**

More than a year later, she glanced up from the computer to find two very handsome men grinning widely at her. She smiled at them, knowing her love for them both shone in her eyes.

“We have a surprise for you,” Reece announced very seriously.

Jack came around to grab her hands and help her out of the chair. She was only five months pregnant, but both men had hovered over her ever since they’d found out. She loved them all the more for it, even if she sometimes got annoyed.

She’d been working on her computer, answering emails and listing her stock on eBay, running the same business she’d been building before the fire. She was never going to be a millionaire, but it paid the bills and gave her the ability to contribute to the family income.

For the past fourteen months, they’d been living in the only shed to survive the fire. She remembered very clearly the day they’d been allowed back up the mountain to survey the damage.

The devastation had been beyond comprehension, and even the television news reports had not prepared them for the reality. Christina had lost everything. Nothing but ash and debris remained on the block where her parents’ house had once stood. She’d felt the loss more keenly when she realized she didn’t even have a photo of her parents.

Slowly, the bus had moved farther up the hill toward the acreage where Reece and Jack had lived. They’d both seen their homes ablaze, so they hadn’t been expecting any miracles, but they got a small one anyway.

Somehow, one of the smaller sheds on Jack's property had been left untouched. It was only about the size of a double garage, and it held just an assortment of forgotten junk. It did, however, contain a septic toilet system, laundry sink, and an outdoor shower. It was enough space for them to live rough when they replaced the electricity with a generator.

It had been the first ray of hope for most of the occupants on the bus that day, and many expressed their amazement and ironic humor that this single shed could survive. Somehow, it lifted the spirits of many. Maybe it was a little absurd, but at least something still stood, something remained even after Mother Nature had sent down her worst. It had proved in a very small and symbolic way that their town had once existed.

The guys had modified it a little to make it more livable, and she'd loved the closeness they'd developed even more by living in such small quarters. The house construction was well underway, and both Reece and Jack had assured her it would be completed long before the baby arrived. She often thought that, although she'd loved all three of them living in the one room, a baby would need more space.

The three of them were building a married life together, and she thought of them as her husbands because that's who they were in her heart. Granted, it was an unusual arrangement, but it was built on the same principles of love and trust as any other marriage.

She let herself be led into the partially completed house, each of her guys holding her by a hand. She'd been lucky. Her burns had healed without infection, and the scars weren't too noticeable. She'd had to work hard to get her fingers working properly, and months of careful exercises and following doctors' orders had eventually paid off. Her hand felt almost back to normal.

Reece and Jack led her to a door and, pushing her forward a little, encouraged her to open it. Even more curious now, she stepped

forward and opened the door to what she knew was going to be the master bedroom.

As the door swung open, her breath caught in her throat, and tears burned behind her eyes. The room was ready to move in well ahead of schedule. Her husbands had finished the main bedroom and the attached bathroom, walk-in closet, and a sitting area. They'd also left enough room for a baby's cot and changing area. The massive king-size bed was already set up in the middle of the room, and they'd piled it high with an assortment of packaged linen.

Tears leaked over her eyelashes, and she swiped at them impatiently.

"Stupid hormones," she grumbled as Reece pulled her back against his chest, hugging her to him and placing his large hands on her slightly rounded belly. Jack stepped forward to kiss her gently.

"Sweetheart, we wanted to ask you something." A little startled at the seriousness of his tone, she pulled away from Reece and turned to eye them both. Looking a little nervous now, the guys seemed to wait for the other to speak. Arching an eyebrow, she almost laughed when they started to shuffle their feet, acting like a couple of kids in the principal's office.

"Just spit it out," she ordered Reece with a wide smile.

"We were wondering...that is, we thought...maybe, if you don't mind...if you would consider..."

Reece was the plainest of plain talkers she'd ever known, and his uncharacteristic nervousness was starting to worry her. She looked to Jack, pleading with her eyes to be told what they wanted to say.

"We wanted to know if you would consider legally changing your name and taking both of ours, you know, hyphenated, so the baby would have his fathers' names." Reece finally pushed out the words and then took a deep breath like he was going to hold it until she answered.

Looking at them both, deliberately drawing out the moment so she was sure she had their full attention, she said, "He already does."



When their nervousness dissolved into confusion, she finally took pity on them and explained.

“I changed my name last week at the courthouse. I was waiting for the right moment to tell you.” She shrugged slightly and said, “Guess this is it.”

They lifted her into the middle of the bed, swept the packages onto the floor, and then both men lay on their sides, looking down. They wore nearly identical, goofy smiles on their faces.

She smiled happily.

Life didn’t get any better than this.

# THE END

<http://www.abbyblake.webs.com/>

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Abby Blake prefers to read or write romance over just about everything else – except maybe chocolate. Most days she can be found hurrying to do what needs to be done so that she can curl up with her laptop and her latest bunch of heroes.



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