



*When the sun goes down
the stakes are raised.*

THEY CALL ME *Trouble*

Sugar and Spice Press

SABRINA LUNA

They Call Me Trouble
by Sabrina Luna

Sugar and Spice Press

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Chapter One

Things had changed, but not in a big way. The subtle changes were just barely noticeable on the surface. Dean Robbins cruised down the main street of the Texas small town, his motorcycle rumbling low and steady between his thighs. He slowed the pace of his Harley to take in the once familiar sights of Westbrook. The lawyers' office and feed store were still in the same place, but a video rental store was gone, replaced by a Starbucks. A smile curled over his lips, as he remembered how the locals had sworn there would never be any big commercial businesses in *their* town.

Oh yeah, things have changed, alright.

Eight months earlier, he'd taken a job at The Triple C Ranch just outside of Dallas. Now, in less than a year, he was riding back into town. But he sensed Westbrook was having its fair share of growing pains. New businesses in town also meant new folks.

Dean's thoughts returned to the phone call he'd received from his former employer, Buck. The older man was stressed out with Hank being gone for a couple of weeks. Hank was the only security-slash-bouncer in Buck's local bar and grill, The Green Lizard, and his wife was having a baby. *Maternity leave for men...who would've thought?* Dean chuckled. It was hard to imagine the big, tough guy being a daddy. Buck had a soft spot for Hank and his wife, since it would be their first child, and allowed the bouncer to take time off.

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But, that's when trouble began, according to Buck. His ex-boss said he'd fill him in on the details when he arrived. Dean was very fortunate that Mrs. Carson, owner of The Triple C Ranch understood. He'd explained that Buck's phone call was a family emergency and immediately left for Westbrook. Buck and his wife, Linda, were not his flesh-and-blood kin, but the older couple were as close as family to him. They'd given him a job at their bar and grill as a bouncer so he could save up enough to pursue his dream to be a cowboy.

Dean loved working outdoors on the ranch, spending time in the saddle and riding horses. Leaving a small town like Westbrook to pursue the cowboy lifestyle wasn't *that* difficult, but leaving behind close friends...well, *that* had been a bit rough, especially when it came to Tia Esperanza.

He hadn't heard from Tia since he'd moved to Dallas. But, then, he didn't own a cell phone—it was too much of a headache to keep up with—nor did he use his email account often. When it came to communication, he preferred it up-close and personal.

And, oh boy, did Tia decide to get up-close and personal on the night before he left! She'd taken him by surprise when she'd kissed him senseless...and started something. Something really good, but really dangerous to their casual friendship. Yet, neither one of them backed down.

He smiled, remembering how he'd ran his fingers through Tia's long, silky black hair. The lushness of her body while he thrust wildly into her, savoring each heady moment of pleasure. Memories of the hottest sex he'd ever had flooded

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through him. And if he wasn't careful he'd have one helluva hard-on by the time he reached The Green Lizard.

He turned into the parking lot just after twelve noon. Slowing his Harley to a stop, he turned off the engine and put down the kickstand, surveying the roadside building. From the looks of things, The Green Lizard had gotten a fresh coat of white paint and a new neon sign, too.

So, Buck's been trying to attract new customers, huh? He studied the newly renovated exterior, a smile curling his lips. The parking lot wasn't full to capacity, but the graveled lot did have more cars than he'd remembered in the past for lunch.

Dean swung off the Harley, giving his body a good, long stretch. His sore muscles strained in protest. It had been a long ride from Dallas, but he'd made good time. The afternoon sun was already high overhead and a light breeze stirred. Overall, it was a pleasant Friday for late summer.

Reaching into the backpack strapped onto his Harley, Dean pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the sweaty road grime from his face and the dust from his pointed-toe cowboy boots. Tossing the handkerchief back into the bag, he then pulled out his black Stetson. After spearing a hand through his hair to tame his wind-tussled locks, he slid the hat onto his head and adjusted it to a perfect fit.

He hoisted the backpack over his shoulder and crossed the parking lot. The gravel crunched under his boots as he made his way to the front entrance of The Green Lizard. A muffled, yet familiar song played inside the building. ZZ Top. Although he couldn't tell which song it was, the drumbeat and edgy guitar riffs spiked his anticipation. Dean took in a deep

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breath, slowly exhaled to release his tension, then pulled open the solid, wooden door and stepped inside.

He paused in the archway. His eyes adjusted to the change of lighting, and then he tipped back the brim of his hat to survey the room. Nothing much had changed with the interior of the bar and grill, he noted. The main floor was scattered with noisy, lunchtime customers seated at small wooden tables. Classic rock music blared from the jukebox in another corner of the room just opposite the bar. As if on cue, a waitress made her way from the kitchen to a cluster of tables with a heavily loaded lunch tray.

The sight of Tia made Dean's heart leap into his throat.

* * * *

Tia was sure glad it was Friday. The customers gathered in the dining room were waiting impatiently for their meals. It wasn't a large crowd, but they were still a handful to handle. Shifting the large tray on her shoulder, she put on her best smile and began making her rounds to each of the tables.

Buck, her boss, had begun a local advertising campaign to bring in more business. It paid off, attracting new faces to the bar and grill. Tia, however, thought it was a double-edged sword. Sure, her tips had increased, but along with it came the usual headaches of being in food service.

But, I won't be here that long. She was planning for the future. Soon she would be graduating from her online classes, receiving a diploma in business accounting. She was grateful her laptop made it easy to broaden her employment horizons.

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There was no way she was going to be stuck waiting tables for tips for the rest of her life. *I deserve better*

She'd lived in Westbrook for two years, but noticed a slow exodus of young people her own age heading toward Dallas. It was the promise of a larger lifestyle, better pay and wider job market and most folks were migrating in that direction. Like Dean. Her heart gave a twinge whenever she thought of her friend...and one-night lover. She drew a quick breath to clear her head and focused on the job-at-hand.

"Here you are, Mr. Taylor." She flashed the older gentleman a big grin, placing the heaping plate of nachos and homemade salsa on the table in front of him.

"*Muchas gracias, Tia!*" But his eyes didn't meet hers. Instead his focus was on her chest. Mentally she tried to reassure herself it was the logo monogrammed on the left breast of her official Green Lizard t-shirt which held his attention. But, she knew it really wasn't.

She politely nodded, and then pivoted on her heel, heading to the next table without another glance.

Two young women dressed in business attire sat at the far corner table, chatting quite animatedly...gossiping, if she guessed right. They glanced up as she drew close and stopped talking. Tia smiled, lowering the tray to hip level and reached for the first plate. "I have a double cheeseburger, no tomatoes and extra pickles."

"That's mine," the first woman replied.

Tia sat down the hot platter, and then reached for the other plate, serving it to the next woman. "And, this is a Green Lizard burger special, all the way."

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"Wow!" Ms. No-Pickles exclaimed in a sudden, heated breath. "Talk about one hundred percent All-American beef!" At first Tia thought she meant the luncheon plate, but a sappy grin spread over the young woman's face while she elbowed her friend to get her attention. Her friend followed the other's astonished gaze past where Tia was standing over to the front door.

"I'll say!" Ms. All-The-Way readily agreed. A similar glazed expression crossed her face.

Tia wondered who'd stepped into the bar and grill, making the two women ogle like silly schoolgirls. Curious, she gradually turned her head and glanced over her shoulder. *Wow!* Tia's interest peaked. She raked a gaze from the tips of the man's scuffed boots to his denim-clad legs and silver belt buckle in appraisal. *Oh my!* The temperature in the room kicked up a notch. She nonchalantly licked her lips, her eyes slowly following up the muscular contours of his torso which were well-defined by a formfitting, black t-shirt.

Despite the bar and grill being located in Texas, The Green Lizard catered to mostly business folks and locals, and rarely got its share of real, honest-to-goodness cowboys.

But here was a fine specimen of one walking through door.

Even though the cowboy could use a good shave, Tia made out a strong jawline and very kissable lips despite the shadow of his hat. It was enough to make a grown woman shiver with anticipation. Dark eyes peered out from beneath the black Stetson. Then, the cowboy's gaze met hers...and he smiled.

It was a *very* familiar smile.

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Tia froze, her heart hammering in her chest. The tray slipped from her hands, but she managed to grab it before it reached the floor. *Dios mio!* Stunned by her own reaction, she placed the empty tray on a vacant nearby table.

"Excuse me, *por favor*." She headed toward the door without looking back at her customers. She crossed the floor with her usual confident stride, but her insides quivered like Jell-O. It had been eight months since she'd heard from him...and it was all her fault. *If I hadn't pressured him, we'd still be friends.* Dean had been the kind of guy she could be herself with...drink beer, toss darts and even share a dirty joke or two. They were good friends. Just friends. But, the last time she saw him was in her bed, buck naked...and he'd made her feel oh-so good. And, when she woke up the next morning, he was gone. There had been no 'goodbye', much less any contact with him in months. Yeah, she'd totally screwed up their good friendship, alright.

Tia drew to a stop a few feet in front of Dean. The cowboy deposited his bag beside the bar, then, with a long stride, closed the space between them. For a split second, she wanted to throw her arms around him. Then, she thought better of it. Every part of her being reacted to him, but she gathered her wits and decided to play it cool.

"Long time, no see, cowboy." She grinned, and gave his arm a gentle punch.

* * * *

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Chapter Two

"Tia, hi." He couldn't help but smile about the way she'd approached him. A wave of relief washed over him. The casual punch on his arm was a throwback to the evenings they'd hung out together tossing darts and drinking beer. So, maybe she wasn't upset with him for slipping off after their night together, he mentally concluded, and continued. "Yeah, I'm back...for the time being. Buck called me at the ranch, said Hank's on maternity leave and you-all could use my help."

She let out a deep, sensual chuckle, which went straight from his heart to his groin. Dean clutched his fists at his side, controlling a sudden urge to sweep the Hispanic beauty into his arms.

Tia continued. "That's right, Hank's gone for a couple weeks, but I didn't know Buck called you. I thought maybe he'd try to handle things himself."

"Handle what things?" He lowered his voice, stepping close enough to catch a whiff of her light, floral scent.

"Just a few wild yokels." She shrugged. "Folks so new to town that they haven't learned how to mind their manners yet."

Dean's gut clenched. He'd done security at The Green Lizard long enough to know what she meant. "Let me guess, they're making a scene, hitting on the staff, things like that, right?"

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"Afraid so." A voice came from behind the bar. He and Tia turned to Buck, who was eyeing them with a snide, grizzled grin. "Tia, why don't you finish with the lunch crowd and I'll fill our cowboy in, okay?"

Tia agreed and quickly scurried off, much to Dean's disappointment. But, he continued to smile and reached over the bar, shaking the older man's hand. Buck's grip wasn't as tight as he remembered. "So, how you been doing?" he asked, taking in the discolored circles under the other man's eyes.

"Fair, but the doctor's got me on meds and I'm not as quick as I'd like to be on the uptake. Know what I mean?"

"No worries, Buck." Dean nodded. "You know I've got your back."

"That's what I'm counting on," the older man grinned. "But, I didn't expect you to hit town until later this afternoon."

Dean told him that he'd left Dallas soon after squaring away the details with the ranch's owner. "Your call sounded urgent, so I headed back to Westbrook as soon as I could."

Placing both hands on the bar, Buck leaned in close, lowering his voice. "Dean, if I didn't know you better, I'd swear you hurried back for another reason than to help me keep the locals at bay."

"What do you mean?" Dean raised an eyebrow.

Buck's eyes flicked to the dining room floor. Dean followed his gaze to Tia. She'd returned to her tables, smiling and refilling tea glasses for her customers. She was completely unaware of the two men staring in her direction. Dean rubbed

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the back of his neck, feeling a twinge of uneasiness in the pit of his stomach. "Yeah, I've been lousy at keeping in touch with folks since I left. Why? Has she said anything?"

"Of course not, cowboy." Buck shrugged. "But I've been around women all my life, so I have a fair sense when it comes to opposite sex. Understanding what they're *not* saying is the trick to understanding them altogether, I'd say."

Dean chuckled. The older man may not be as quick as he'd liked, but the man was still sharp as a tack in other areas. "I get your point, uh...I think." He returned his attention back to Buck. "So, I'd better go find a hotel room for my stay. I could use a hot shower and a few winks before tonight."

"That reminds me," Buck grinned. The older man slid a brass key across the bar in his direction. "Linda's cleaned up our guest room over at the house. If you don't mind sleeping under the same roof with two old folks, our place is yours while you're here."

He took the key with a smile and tipped his hat. "Thanks, Buck. I appreciate it. I'll be back in plenty of time for happy hour and the evening shift."

"No, thank you, Dean." The older man winked. "I knew I could count on you."

* * * *

Out of the corner of her eye, Tia watched Dean exit the bar and grill. She exhaled a deep breath, releasing the tension which was coiled tightly throughout her body. He would be back in town for a few weeks, helping out at The Green Lizard. A kaleidoscope of mixed feelings swirled inside her.

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His unexpected return really knocked her for a loop. *Heaven help me!* Tia shook her head, lifting a plastic bin filled with empty plates and glasses and headed toward the kitchen.

Of course she was happy Dean was back in town, but it was still unnerving. And, now, just seeing him again set her senses on high alert. Her libido was responding to the white-hot night they'd spent together. One unforgettable night. *Dios mio!* The challenge for Tia was keeping her hands to herself. With the cowboy of her dreams hovering nearby, it was going to be tough. Real tough.

Tia attempted to shake off the sensations swirling inside her. *He's just going to be in town for a few weeks, and then he'll be gone again.* The thought crossed her mind like a dark cloud. Tia's heart gave a familiar pang at the recollection of awakening to an empty bed. Her cowboy had ridden off into the sunrise. As quick as lightening, an idea crossed her mind. Maybe, just maybe, she could attempt to at least salvage their friendship. *Yeah, I can do that!* A bubble of hope expanded inside her chest and dispelled the irksome dark cloud. Tia smiled, her spirits lifting, and happily returned her attention to the lunchtime customers.

* * * *

After a quick shower, Dean slept like a baby. When he awoke, he was feeling refreshed from the motorcycle ride from Dallas to Westbrook. It had been a long ride, but well-worth it just to see the relief on Buck's face. Dealing with troublesome yokels was nothing the old man had to worry about now that he was back to help. He rose from the bed

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and gave his body a good, hardy stretch, then headed for the kitchen.

Buck had said to make himself at home and Dean did. After his former boss had married Linda five years ago, Dean had offered to help and spent spare moments away from The Green Lizard sprucing up the house. It was now a cozy home, somewhere Buck and Linda could snuggle together and get away from the bar and grill business.

Nibbling on a bologna sandwich, Dean headed down the narrow hallway toward the spare bedroom. Framed pictures lined the walls. He paused, looking over each one, remembering the good times. There was Buck and Linda's wedding picture, a snapshot of him and Hank in their Green Lizard tees in front of the bar and a picture which made Dean do a double-take. It was one of him and Tia together at the local Fourth of July barbeque cookout. It was taken last summer. Tia's jet-black hair was only to her shoulders back then. She was smiling at the camera in her denim short-shorts and showing off her stunning set of legs.

Dean smiled, recalling how he'd kissed his way up her legs on that special night. He'd always thought she was pretty, but they'd played the friendship card since she'd come to work at the bar and grill right after settling in Westbrook. They'd drank beer and tossed darts, doing things friends normally did—but, deep down, he wondered if she'd always liked him a bit more than she was letting on. Dean had kept his hands to himself. A kiss on the cheek, a friendly punch on the arm or even a casual arm over the shoulder—that was as physical as they'd ever been. Sure, he'd dated other girls, but those

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relationships were like a can of soda left open in the refrigerator—they quickly fizzled out.

Dean wondered if Tia had always felt this way while he took another bite of his sandwich. Or was *he* the one too slow on the uptake? He wasn't sure.

The clock in the living room chimed the hour, breaking through his thoughts. *Shit!* Dean grumbled. He needed to change clothes and head back to The Green Lizard for Happy Hour. But, if there was one thing he was sure of—Tia Esperanza definitely had made an imprint on his heart.

* * * *

Tia sat at the bar and squinted at the laptop screen in front of her. With a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, attempting to regain her focus. She'd read over the email from the online business school three times already, but nothing had sunk in. Her mind was somewhere else. No, *on* someone else. Since lunchtime, her concentration had totally disappeared. Poof—gone!

"I told you that small screen was going to ruin your eyes," a familiar voice came from across the bar. Tia opened her eyes, smiling over at the round, rosy-cheeked woman.

"*Gracias*, Linda, but it's not the screen." She shrugged. "I don't know what's wrong."

"Well, you've been either studying or working the past few months." The older woman put her hands on her hips.

"When's the last time you had any fun, Tia?"

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Tia blinked, stunned. "Fun? I have plenty of fun," she protested. "Besides, I'm really trying to finish these courses and graduate."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, Buck and I are really proud of you for taking those online classes. Westbrook's not a happening place for a pretty, smart young lady, like you."

"I know," Tia sighed. "One day you and Buck will retire, maybe move to Florida and live happily ever after, but I don't plan on waiting tables forever." She held the older woman's gaze, knowing she, of all people, would understand. Linda always did.

The older woman gave her a thin smile and nodded. "You're right. You're smart to consider a better career than this." She gestured toward the empty dining room with its small stage in the background. "But, I'm glad Dean's back in town for a few weeks. Maybe he'll perk you up."

"Perk me up?" Tia raised an eyebrow. "I'm fine, really."

"Well, if you ask me—"

Before she could finish her sentence, the phone rang, drawing Linda away to the other end of the bar. Tia's heart warmed as she watched the older woman. Linda and Buck always were very supportive of her. She was very fortunate to have them both as good employers and friends, but they knew very little about her love life...or lack of one. Here lately, she hadn't been in the mood to even think about a man in her life. Well, except for one person who'd crossed her mind from time to time.

"Howdy, Tia," a deep, husky drawl came from behind her.

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A spark of electric awareness zipped down her spine. His timing was impeccable. Slowly, she turned on the barstool to face Dean. He was standing only an arm's length from her, his fingers casually hooked into the belt loops of his black jeans and a grin on his face, looking every bit like the sexy cowboy he was. Her breath hitched in her chest. *Damn, he's still a handsome devil.* Tia couldn't help but smile.

Dean stood close enough that she could smell the fresh, clean scent of soap which radiated from him. There was also a subtle hint of natural musk too. It was a sensual combination, which no matter how she tried to suppress it, stirred her slumbering libido.

From beneath the brim of his cowboy hat, Dean's dark eyes twinkled. His gaze slid from her face to the rest of her. Turnabout was only fair. Sure, she'd been ogling him, but still her face grew warm. Tia mentally cursed. She was blushing like a silly schoolgirl.

"Uh, Dean...hello." Tia strengthened her stance on the stool. "What brings you back to the Lizard so early?"

"I promised Buck I'd help you-all set up for Happy Hour," Dean replied with a nod. "I'm glad I did, because it looks like you're busy here." Tia followed his gaze to her laptop.

"Yes, but I'm almost done."

"So, are we planning on a busy night tonight?" He arched an eyebrow, his dark gaze lingering on her blue denim skirt while she slid from the barstool. With a half-conscious gesture, she ran her hands over the denim, smoothing out a few wrinkles. It wasn't a mini-skirt, but it didn't come to her knees either.

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"What do you mean?" Tia tried to look innocent, but, from the expression on Dean's face, she knew he knew better. "Hey now, cowboy, I'm just showing enough leg to guarantee some good tips from the guys." She winked, and then turned, closing her laptop. "Besides, the locals are still pinching pennies. I'm just trying to loosen them up, that's all."

Dean gave a deep chuckle. "If you say so, missy, but you're going to make it difficult for me to keep my mind on my job."

Tia blushed again, a warm sensation flooding her body. She just continued to smile and rounded the bar, placing her laptop safely underneath the counter beside her purse and Buck's trusty baseball bat.

"Well, the customers aren't all *that* bad. There's just a few you'll need to keep tabs on." Tia informed him with a shake of her head, and then glanced at the large clock over the bar. "My time's up, cowboy. I've got to get to work. Tell Linda that I'm restocking the beer when she gets off the phone, will you?"

* * * *

Dean watched intently as Tia walked toward the kitchen. The soft curve of her bottom as her skirt clung to it like a second skin and her long, thick, braided hair swaying down her back. The temperature in the room kicked up a notch. He drew a deep breath and dragged his gaze back to the bar.

"Hello, stranger." Linda's eyes sparkled in the neon light of the overhead sign. "We're mighty glad you're back in town."

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Dean leaned over the counter and gave the older woman a tiny peck on her cheek. "Me too," he smiled. "Are you minding the bar tonight?"

Linda nodded. "Buck's taking the night off. I insisted. Hate to admit it, but he's not as spry as he used to be, but he's still a good one." The older woman grinned, and then leaned close, lowering her voice. "And, for what it's worth, Tia's happy you're back too."

"That's what Buck said earlier, but I'm not sure." Dean rubbed the back of his neck. "She's been all smiles, but seems a bit, you know, distant."

"Don't worry, cowboy." Linda reached over the bar, patting his hand with a reassuring smile. "Haven't you heard the old saying, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'?"

"The heart, huh?" Dean glanced over, studying the older woman's face. Her sly expression spoke volumes. "That's not the version I heard." He winked, flashing her a wicked grin.

"Well, it's almost time to open. Don't just stand there wasting my dime," Linda said, abruptly switching the subject. She hitched her thumb, gesturing over to the kitchen door. "Tia might need some help with the beer cart. Why don't you give her a hand, hmm?"

Dean glanced at the door, then back at Linda. "Okay, boss lady, I can take a hint." And, with that, he pivoted on his heel, heading to the kitchen's walk-in cooler.

* * * *

Tia cursed under her breath, pulling another icy box from the cooler shelf. The air was so frosty that she could actually

see her breath in the dimly lit cooler. It was one of her least favorite duties, but she'd rather save Linda from chilling her old bones. She was lost in concentration when the door swung open, sending a warm wave of air into the frozen walk-in. "Hey, shut the door, please," she called over her shoulder while tugging at another hefty box.

"Sure thing." Dean's familiar voice sent a jolt of alertness down her spine. "Here. Let me give you a hand with that." Tia stepped back, giving him room to maneuver in the cramped space. Dean effortlessly pulled two more boxes from the shelf and placed them on the metallic, wheeled cart.

"Anything else?" He asked while rubbing his palms over his denim clad thighs. Even though the gesture was innocent enough, Tia's heart skipped a beat.

Damn, if the boy only knew just how sexy he is

She shook her head, then turned to lay a hand on the door. "Just roll these boxes out to Linda while I—"

"Tia?" His voice was soft and smooth as velvet over the loud humming of the refrigerator unit. She turned to face him and marveled at how the cooler's light swept over the handsome angles of his face, accenting his strong, masculine features.

"Si?" He stepped around the cart, closing the short distance between them. Tia raised her chin, smiling up into his eyes.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry, that's all."

"Sorry?" She narrowed her eyebrows, perplexed. "Sorry for what, Dean?"

"When I got to the ranch, it was nuts. Before I could get the dust off my boots, they threw me into training for the job. I didn't have time to call and let you know..."

"Shhh..." She placed her fingers over his lips to silence him. "It's okay, cowboy. Really, it is." *Besides, I'm the one who pounced on you. I'm the one who screwed up our friendship.* The dark thoughts bubbled up inside her, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything. Not just yet. Perhaps later.

Dean removed her hand from his lips. The warmth of his fingers made her numb fingers tingle in the frosty quarters. With a gentle smile, he pressed a kiss on her open palm. A flicker of heat ignited deep inside her. Tia gave a soft gasp, but didn't pull away.

"Dean, I don't think..."

"Good." He nodded, a slow grin spreading over his face. "Don't think." And, with that, his other arm wrapped around her waist, drawing her close. His lips pressed against hers. And for a split second, the world around her went blessedly silent.

The only thing she was aware of was the sweet sensation of his kiss. It felt right. Oh, so right and Tia found herself kissing him back. But her gusto soon gave way to a twinge of guilt and, laying a hand to his chest, Tia pulled back.

"Dean, we shouldn't be doing this." Even as soon as the words left her kissed-numb lips, she saw the hurt in his eyes. But, he straightened back to full height, shaking his head.

"I don't understand, Tia." He frowned. "I thought everything was cool between us."

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She assured him it was, then added, "It's not you, it's me, cowboy. Perhaps I should've just kept—"

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Yeah?" Dean shouted over the refrigerator's loud hum.

Linda's muffle voice replied from behind the thick doorway. "You two better hurry. I've already got the open sign on and I need those beers—*pronto!*"

Tia groaned, wishing for just a few minutes more with Dean. As if reading her mind, he curled a finger under her chin, tenderly lifting her gaze to meet his. "After work, we'll talk this out. Okay?"

"Sure," she readily agreed, then turned to swing open the large walk-in cooler's door and pushed out the metal cart. The outside air quickly began to thaw the areas of her body which Dean hadn't managed to warm up with his kiss. But Tia's emotions were still in a swirl of astonishment and confusion.

Linda stood behind the bar with her hands on her hips and a half-smile on her face. "Hey, sorry to bother you two, but we'd better get those beers in the 'fridge. It looks like it's going to be a busy night." The older woman tilted her head, gesturing to the bar and grill's little stage. The Rusty Cats, a local four-piece band, were setting up their instruments.

"*Dios mio!*" Tia muttered under her breath. The Rusty Cats had a decent fan following in town and whenever they played, The Green Lizard would draw in a crowd at least double its usual size. Yes, it was going to be a busy night, for sure. And, in a way, she was relieved.

Maybe it would help to keep her mind off Dean's bone melting kiss.

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Chapter Three

The band wasn't half-bad. Dean made his rounds through the crowded bar and grill, bobbing his head in time with the music. They knew classic rock covers, a few country-western tunes and even managed to work a few original pieces into their set. His eyes roamed over the floor in front of the stage. Several couples danced, their bodies moving together in such a sensual way, it made him turn away. All he could think of was Tia.

He didn't regret stealing a kiss from her in the walk-in cooler. Dean smiled recalling how she'd pressed her cold fingers against his lips, sending a shiver of anticipation over his body, despite the frigid surroundings. Not even an Arctic blast would've frozen the sensations stirring in his groin. But, what he did regret was that she'd cut it short.

Tia breezed past again, a large tray of drinks in her hands. He knew that smile well. It was the "the customer is always right" smile. The one which earned her big tips and kept everyone happy. However, from the determined look in her eyes, Dean knew she'd have a good night in tips for all the hard work. Secretly, he'd caught a glimpse at her email before she'd shut the laptop. He couldn't help but notice she was taking classes online. Not only was Tia a fine looking woman, but she was smart too. Real smart.

"Dean? Hey, Dean!" Linda was calling him to the bar. He turned on his boot heel and headed over. "Will you grab the

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cart and hit the cooler again? I need a couple more six-packs of domestic," she gestured to the metallic cart.

Dean couldn't help but grin. When Linda had her bartending hat on, she knew her business...and that was taking care of her thirsty customers. It was no wonder The Green Lizard managed to keep going when other small town watering holes had come and went over the years.

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded, rolling the cart toward the kitchen. The swinging doors swung open again, catching him off-guard.

"Come through, cowboy," Tia shouted over the loud music, another heavy tray hoisted over her shoulder. The scent of hamburgers and spicy salsa teased his nose as she hustled past, but it wasn't the food which held his attention. It was the lovely waitress carrying it out into the busy crowd. The way the denim skirt clung to the rounded cheeks of her bottom was the stuff wet dreams were made of. A sly grin spread over his face. *Oh yeah...*

"Dean!" Linda's voice snapped him out of his fantasy. He tossed up a hand, giving her a friendly wave, and then pushed the cart through the kitchen's swinging doors.

Even though he was enjoying the steady flow of business tonight, Dean recalled what he'd promised Tia. He couldn't wait for The Green Lizard to close, because tonight, they would talk it out, which meant telling Tia exactly how he felt about her.

How he'd *always* felt about her.

But, what about Tia? Dean mused, recalling her breaking off their kiss just a few hours earlier in the cooler. She was

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sending him mixed signals. One minute, she'd punch him in the arm, like they were still just friends. Then, when he'd kissed her, she'd definitely kissed back. And then...

Dean shook his head, frustrated. *Why the heck did she pull away*

Stepping into the walk-in cooler with the cart, he paused to draw a deep breath. The air was frosty, yet helped to clear his mind. Dean removed his Stetson, spearing a hand through his tussled hair, then set it back into place. While he loaded the beer boxes onto the cart, he vowed he'd get Tia to talk it out. They'd have to straighten out this whole thing...tonight.

* * * *

The Rusty Cats were onstage, really pleasing the crowd which had gathered to hear them rock the bar and grill. A satisfied smile on her face, Tia made her way through the crowd with her tray. Business was brisk and steady, just the way she liked it. Her apron was already stuffed with wrinkled bills too. It was another sign the night was proving to be quite successful.

However, Tia's face ached from smiling, along with her feet. All she could think about was getting off from work and sinking into a hot bubble bath. She was looking forward to soaking away every ounce of tension in her body.

But then, her thoughts turned to Dean, the cowboy with the killer kiss. He'd sure surprised her with that lip-lock in the cooler just before the evening shift had started.

Surprised and aroused her.

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Dean Robbins was sex on two-legs...from the top of his cowboy hat down to his scruffy boots. *Damn, he's making it hard for me to resist.* And even though she was glad he'd returned to Westbrook, she was also confused by her feelings for him. To her, friends and lovers were like water and vinegar...they just didn't mix. But it seemed Dean wanted to pick up where they'd left off. She hadn't planned on him returning so soon that the memory of their one-night fling was still fresh in her mind...and her heart.

And, of course, Dean had done the right thing by apologizing for not contacting her for eight months. It was okay with her. Life went on. But now, he was back and, from the way he kissed her, the steamy feeling he'd provoked clashed with her conscious. It rekindled sensations inside her which were hot, heavy and strong. Dean was one intense guy. He was also passionate, hardworking and sexy as hell. *There's nothing wrong with him...nothing at all.*

She soberly concluded the problem was her.

She was thankful Linda's interruption had come at just the right time. It'd made it easy to avoid trying to explain to Dean why she was feeling a bit confused.

"Hey, Tia!" A booming voice came from behind her. "How about fetching me another whiskey, darling?"

Tia turned around, meeting the gaze of Darrell Bell, one of her least favorite customers. Her smile faded. Shook her head. "Sorry, Darrell, but Linda's cutting you off. No more drinks tonight for you."

Darrell rose from his table on unsteady feet and glared at her with a sour expression. He was short, but stocky,

reminding her of bulldog. From the look of his blood-shot eyes, Tia knew her boss had made the right decision.

"I can pay, damn it!" He snarled, raising his voice. "Hell, if I wanted to, I could buy this whole damn bar!"

For a pain-in-the-butt, Darrell was right. Money was certainly no problem for the Bell family. Tia forced a pleasant smile on her face. "Darrell, you know we have the right to refuse service, so —"

"So, who gives a jack-damn! I want another drink. Now!" Darrell reached out, grabbing her forearm. His movement was so sudden that Tia lost her grip on the tray, sending an empty beer bottle to the floor with a resounding crash.

Tia's anger flared. "Let me go or—"

"Or what?" Darrell taunted. Tia jerked free from his grasp just as the crowd, which had gathered around them, parted like the Red Sea. In a few brisk strides, Dean was standing beside Darrell. He placed a firm hand on the drunken man's shoulder.

"It's time to go, sir." Dean's tone was low and steady. Tia's gaze flickered from Darrell to Dean. From beneath the brim of his cowboy hat, his eyes held a cool hint of warning.

The stubborn man pulled away from Dean and shot him a hard glare. "Just who the hell are you, cowpoke, to tell me it's time to go?"

"I'm the one you've been looking for," Dean squarely met Darrell's gaze. "They call me 'trouble'."

Tia bit down on her lip, stifling a grin. Darrell took a step back, his face beet-red with anger.

"I'm not looking for trouble. Just another drink, that's all."

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Dean glanced over at Tia. She shook her head. "You've been cut-off, sir, so if you'd please—

With a fluid motion, Darrell pulled away from Dean's hand and lashed out. His fist made hard contact with Dean's face. Startled, Tia's heart leaped into her throat. The gathered crowd let out a unified gasp. The cowboy stumbled back a couple of feet from the impact, but didn't fall. Instead, he lunged at Darrell with a snarl. The two men scrambled, Darrell attempting to get away and Dean trying to subdue him. Finally, Dean got the upper hand. He grabbed Darrell by the shirt collar, his other hand securing the unruly man's arm behind his back in a firm hold.

Darrell let out a yelp, his grim face twisted with pain. Dean dragged him to his feet, and then forcibly escorted the unruly man toward the front door.

"Stay out of my bar, Darrell Bell, for good," Linda shouted from behind the bar, shaking Buck's trusty baseball bat. "And if you come back, it'll be the boys in blue making you leave. You have my word on that!"

Tia watched the two men exit the bar and grill. The door slammed shut. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Darrell had got a good slug in, but Dean hadn't let that stop him from getting the situation under control. Sure, she'd seen Hank and Buck escort unruly types out of the bar. But, with Dean, it was somehow different.

All around her, crowded room returned to normal. Customers resumed their chatter while the band launched into a new song. One of the young busboys hurried from the kitchen with a broom and dustpan to commence sweeping up

the broken glass. Tia, however, was glued to the floor, her stomach knotted with anxiety. It wasn't until Dean strolled back through the door that she exhaled a sigh of relief. Setting her tray on an empty table, she met him halfway across the floor.

"Are you okay, Tia?" Dean asked, gently taking hold of her arm, lowering his head to closely examine where Darrell had grabbed her.

"Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing," she replied with a nervous laugh. The tenderness of his touch sent an unsettling wave over her. "I'm fine. It's just a bit sore, but I did jerk my arm away. That was my fault."

"He shouldn't have laid his hands on you." His tone held a hint of possessiveness. Any other time, she would reply that she could take care of herself. But, instead, his comment struck a deep emotional cord inside her.

Tia swallowed hard, unsure of how to reply. She merely shook her head. Her thoughts were unclear. However, her heart was thumping wildly in her chest and her body warmed, responding to his attention.

Dean raised his head, his dark gaze meeting hers.

Tia gasped. "You're hurt!" She raised a hand to his face, surveying the bruised skin of his cheekbone. "Linda! We're going to need an ice pack!" Tia called over to the bar without taking her eyes from Dean.

The cowboy chuckled. A slow grin spread over his features which released the tension in his eyes. "I'll be all right. I got worse from trying to shoe a mare my first week at the ranch."

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He shrugged his big shoulders. "No one told me her name was 'Dangerous Dolly' 'til it was too late."

Tia smiled back and took him by the arm, leading him toward the bar. "Well, cowboy, I still think you'll need a little ice on your cheek." She turned her attention to Linda, who was eyeing them both with a lopsided grin.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of him. Speaking of which..." The older woman's voice trailed off as she gestured to the crowded room.

"Sure thing, Linda." Tia nodded, then smiled over at Dean. "Thanks, cowboy." She winked and gave his arm a gentle punch before heading off to finish her shift.

* * * *

"Ouch," Dean muttered under his breath after Tia was out of earshot from the bar.

Linda raised an eyebrow and handed him a cold pack. "Ouch?" she repeated with a confused expression on her face.

"Yeah. Did you see that?" He lightly touched the spot where Tia had playfully punched him. "That hurts more than this." Dean gestured to the bruised spot beneath his eye before laying the icy coolness against his face.

"She'll come around, partner." Linda smiled, but her reassurance didn't lighten his mood.

"I tell you what, all this pushing and pulling is tough on a man's ego...well, *my* ego." Dean frowned. "Tia's got me so confused. I just can't read her signals. But, we're going to get it all talked out tonight, after work."

"You are?"

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"Yes, we are." He gave a firm nod. "Tonight I'm going to tell Tia exactly what's on my mind."

"You might want to tell her what's in your heart too, cowboy," Linda replied with a twinkle in her eye.

"Well, then, you'd better wish me lots of luck, Linda." Dean lowered the ice pack and smiled over at the older woman.

"Because I'm gonna need it."

Linda laughed at his remark, and then turned her attention back to the busy bar. Lowering the ice pack from his bruised cheek, Dean turned around and surveyed the room. The customers were happy, the beer was flowing and The Rusty Cats were jammin' on another rock number for the night. The whole bar and grill was buzzing with energy. Dean smiled, wishing he could join the others on the dance floor with Tia—but, tonight, it was business as usual.

His stomach was still knotted tight when he recalled that scum laying a hand on Tia. The man Linda had called 'Darrell Bell' was the type of guy who gave men a bad reputation with good women. A fowl mouth and attitude to match, Dean had been glad to escort the man to his parked SUV in the gravel lot outside.

Darrell had cursed and spit when Dean'd released his hold on him outside the bar and grill. "I think old Buck is crazy for hiring a cowpoke like you around here. This is a Podunk town, which doesn't mean hill of beans to me. Neither does this dump!" The angry man waved a hand in the direction of The Green Lizard.

Even though he knew the guy was just blowing off steam, Dean didn't take his eyes off of him. He held Darrell's gaze

with his hands clutched into tight fists by his side in case the yahoo decided to take another swing at him. "I think you'd better get in your SUV and leave. Now."

But Darrell still raved on. "And Linda was threatening me, waving that bat around like she owns the place. Yeah, right. She only married the owner. It doesn't give her or that ding-bat waitress the right to—"

That had done it. Dean stepped forward and grabbed Darrell by the shirt collar, pushing him against the SUV with a resounding *thud*.

"Listen, *punk*, nobody, especially you, talks about my friends like they're dirt," he growled. "Now, I said, it's time for you to leave."

Darrell's eyes widened. "Okay, okay, cowboy. I'm going."

Even though his temples were throbbing with anger, Dean had released his hold on Darrell Bell and took a step back. He drew a deep breath to clear his head, watching while the man got into the shiny vehicle and peeled out of the parking lot, spraying gravel beneath its wheels.

"Asshole," Dean muttered under his breath, then took another deep breath to clear his head. The night was quiet again, except for the dull thump of bass drifting from behind the walls of The Green Lizard. For a moment, he couldn't wait to be away from Westbrook, away from the bar and grill packed full of customers. In a few weeks, he'd be back at The Triple C Ranch and doing what he loved—being a real, honest-to-God cowboy.

But Tia's reaction to the bruise under his eye had been very touching. The expression on her face was one of genuine

concern. Sure, he'd had worse, but seeing the worried look on her face had made his scuffle with the local yahoo a bit more tolerable. *She really cares about me.* Dean let out a sigh of relief. This only raised the stakes on their after hours get-together. Linda was right; he'd have to tell Tia his true feelings for her. *Damn it! I'm not good at those types of conversations either*

But, if he didn't tell her, it would be an even bigger mistake.

Dean slid from the barstool and made his way around the bar and grill again. Men nodded, raising their beers in his direction. It was their way of giving him silent kudos for ushering Darrell Bell out of the bar without any blood shed. The women, on the other hand, were flashing him their best and brightest smiles. Even though the attention from the grateful crowd stoked his ego, Dean was unnerved by the women's comely gestures. He was interested in only one woman in the place. The one with her tray stacked high with beverages and a broad smile on her face.

All of his attention was on her.

He caught Tia's eye while she zipped past him on her way to service another table and flashed her a wide grin. And, in the busy-ness of the bar and grill, he could've sworn he saw her blush.

Yes, she was the one for him. They were meant to be together.

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Chapter Four

Tia was relieved as she stepped from the shower after washing away the scent of another busy night at The Green Lizard. Any other time she'd be ready to slide into a hot bubble bath and then her favorite night gown, but not tonight. Dean said he'd come by after he helped Linda finish closing up the bar and grill. It was just after two in the morning, and even after a long, busy shift, Tia was wide awake.

Running a brush through her thick, dark hair, she drew a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. *So, what's wrong with a late-night conversation between two friends?* she mused. But, the way her body was reacting was entirely different. Butterflies swarmed in her tummy. *Oh, come on, get over it!* She mentally grumbled at the unsettling sensation. *It's just Dean...my friend, Dean*

She rummaged through her closet and pulled on a pair of comfortable jeans and a soft, pink t-shirt over lacy underwear. She was glad she'd had time to shower before Dean was to arrive. Tia took a quick glance in the mirror. *Casual, but nice*, she concluded, a smile curling her lips, and then decided on a few squirts of her favorite perfume. The combination of rose and sandalwood soothed away her jitters and also filled the small mobile home with a warm, feminine scent.

"Everything's cool," she said out loud, walking into the kitchenette and opening a cabinet to find tortilla chips to go

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with the salsa she'd brought home from work. Dean said he'd bring the beer. "It'll be just like old times." Tia smiled, recalling how they used to 'chill' after work at her place, sipping beer and chatting about everything under the sun. Everything, that is, except sex.

For whatever reason, the topic never came up until ...

The memories of their last night together crept into her mind. He was so tempting and so downright sexy that Tia had decided to take the plunge and kissed him. Then, one led to another and another...

Standing with her back against the kitchen cabinets, Tia closed her eyes, recalling Dean in all his naked glory. A bittersweet pang ached between her legs at the memory. *Damn it!* She tried to subdue the erotic urges swirling inside her.

But the cowboy was making it difficult for her to control her libido...like tonight at The Green Lizard. The way he'd grinned over at her had sent a wave of warmth all over her body, from head to toe. Even though she knew he was doing his job and keeping a watchful eye out for trouble, she'd felt the heat of his gaze following her around the crowded bar and grill for the remainder of the night shift.

She drew a deep breath, attempting to regain her composure, then, she heard it. It was the unmistakable, yet familiar sound of a motorcycle outside. The rumble caused her pulse to quicken, her heart leaping into her throat. From the kitchen window she watched as the Harley slowly made its way down the driveway and rolled to a stop.

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Dios mio! He's here. Tia headed for the front door, then paused to lick her dry lips. She drew a deep breath, then placed a hand on the doorknob. With a sharp exhale, she swung it open and smiled. "Hey cowboy, what took you so long?"

Dean was making his way up her gravel walk in an unhurried, laid back pace. In the amber glow of the outside security light, his slow, sexy swagger sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. He climbed the steps to the front door. "I dropped by Buck and Linda's for a quick shower. Why? Did I keep you waiting?" The brim of his Stetson shielded his eyes, but Tia could see the corners of his sensual mouth spread into a wide grin.

A wicked, sexy-as-hell grin.

"No, not long." Tia shook her head. "And what's salsa without beer, hmm?" She joked, attempting to lighten her mood. Dean stepped through the door. The light scent of soap and musk enveloped her senses. "Let me get that," she quickly offered, taking the six-pack of beer from his hands. "Just make yourself at home!" She called over her shoulder and headed for the kitchenette to put some distance between her and the cowboy. He hadn't been through the door less than a minute and, already, her libido was humming to life.

Now, she knew exactly why they called him 'trouble'.

* * * *

Dean took off his hat, placing it on the coffee table and glanced around the living room. Not much had changed in eight months, but he did notice a couple of new throw-pillows

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on the well-worn couch and a new lamp on the side-table. The room radiated genuine warmth, but wasn't overly frilly—like Tia herself.

"Do you mind if I turn on some music?" he called toward the kitchenette.

"No, go ahead," Tia replied. "Pick whatever you'd like...your choice."

He stepped over to the stereo, curious as to what Tia had been listening to on her CD player. Pressing the 'start' button, he was pleasantly surprised to hear the familiar melody of Patsy Cline's *Crazy* fill the living room. Dean closed his eyes and enjoyed the classic country-western tune, a bittersweet smile curving his lips. He inhaled deeply, reeling in the comforting sense of familiarity. Memories washed over him, making his heart pang with a mixture of emotions. He was glad she'd agreed to see him after work. But there was so much he wanted to say. *But how do I begin?* He wasn't sure.

"I hope you're hungry." Tia's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. Dean's eyes snapped open and turned to see her carrying a small tray from the kitchenette with two opened beers and a bowl of chips and salsa. She placed it on the coffee table beside his hat. "I got your favorite salsa ...extra spicy." Tia grinned over at him, taking a seat on the couch and picked up a bottle of beer.

"Thanks. That's one of the little things I really miss about The Green Lizard...Linda's homemade, extra spicy salsa." He grinned, grabbing a chip, using it to scoop up a large portion of the salsa, then popped it into his mouth. Red hot and

loaded with flavor it exploded like a firecracker, overpowering his senses with its heat.

"Woohoo!" Dean exclaimed. He felt as if his eyes were bugging out of his head and tears threatened to stream down his cheeks, but he had to smile. "Oh yeah, once again Linda's made a helluva potent batch!"

"I'd say so, cowboy." Tia laughed, amused by the expression on his face. "I guess you'll just have to come back to town more often to get a couple of jars, huh?"

He wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes, then reached for a beer, taking a long swig to cool the fire in his throat. "Maybe Linda can FedEx me a case or two from Florida," he smiled. A dark expression fell over Tia's face. She looked away for a moment, as if deep in thought.

Dean sank down on the couch beside her. "Yeah, Linda told me she and Buck were planning to retire to Florida next spring. I'm sure The Green Lizard will be in good hands. They wouldn't sell their bar and grill to just anyone." He gently consoled her, taking her hand. "Besides, I think you have other plans, huh?"

"What?" She turned to meet his gaze. "I mean, I do. I'll be graduating from my online classes soon. I can apply for another job once I get my diploma."

"That's wonderful, Tia," Dean grinned, tenderly squeezing her hand. "I couldn't help but notice you were doing homework on your laptop at The Lizard this afternoon. I'm really proud of you, baby."

Her mood appeared to lighten. She smiled over at him. "Si, Linda and Dean have been great about letting me do

homework between my shifts. I'm graduating with a diploma in bookkeeping soon. My feet are usually killing me by the end of a long shift. And, between me and you, I'm tired of toting trays for a living and dealing with..." Her voice trailed off.

Dean nodded empathically. "Guys like that scum from tonight. Yeah, it was lucky I was there tonight to escort him to the door. Things could've gotten uglier."

Tia's eyes widened. She removed her hand from his gentle grasp and placed her bottle on the coffee table. "Speaking of which, let me take a good look at your eye." She turned, leaning in, and raised a hand to cup his chin. A wave of heated lust flared in Dean's body at her sudden closeness. The scent of her filled his senses. Dean desperately wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her soft lips. But he swallowed hard and attempted, for the time being, to stay cool.

"It's a bit tender around the cheekbone, but Linda gave me some arnica cream to dab on the bruise. It'll be gone before you know it." He reassured her with a thin smile. "Besides, I think Bell's going to be sorer in the morning."

Tia smirked and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Yeah," he nodded. "I'll admit I put quite a tight hold on him, that's for sure. But he had it coming. I'd rather deal with a bucking stallion any day than a yahoo who can't handle his booze."

Tia laughed. "I couldn't agree more, but I'm so glad you were there tonight."

"Me too." He gave a firm nod, and then lowered his voice. "I don't want anything happen to you."

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Tia's stomach gave a nervous flip at his serious expression. "I can take care of myself, you know."

"I'm sure you can, but I don't like the idea of that guy laying a hand on you."

Dean's overprotective attitude made her smile. "I don't either, but we won't have to worry about Darrell anymore, thanks to you." Tia lowered her hand from Dean's cheek and sank back on the couch with a smug smile. "And when Linda tells Buck about how he smart-mouthed me and took a swing at you, he'll be barred from The Green Lizard, for sure."

"Good riddance," Dean muttered, and then took another swig of his beer before setting the empty bottle on the coffee table. An uneasy silence fell between them. He wiped a palm down his denim-clad thigh, then reached over and took her hand again. "Thanks for having me over after work, Tia."

She gave a little shake of her head. "No worries, cowboy. Remember, we used to do this all the time." She smiled over at him. "And what better way to unwind after a late shift than a beer with an old friend, right?"

In the soft lighting of the living room, Dean's eyes appeared to grow darker. *Uh oh, that's not good.* She turned her gaze away, attempting to organize her thoughts. It was now or never. "Dean, about what happened the last night you were here..." She paused, licking her dry lips. "I-I'm so sorry I ruined our friendship."

"Ruined?" Dean's hand tightened around hers. "Tia, how can you say that?" He sounded stunned. "You did no such

thing! Why, you mean more to me than a friend." His tone was soft, low and sincere. It made her heart skip a beat.

More than a friend? Tia drew a deep breath. Had she heard him correctly? She turned to face him once more. His eyes were now glimmering in the soft lamp light as he continued. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. Hell, I tried in the cooler, but you wouldn't let me." He raised an eyebrow, a sensual smile curving his lips.

Her cheeks stung with embarrassment, recalling their kiss in the cold storage cooler. A kiss which'd warmed her from head to toe, kicking her libido into gear. "But there's no need for you to apologize," she replied. "I'm the one who went *loco* that night. I thought I'd never see you again once you got settled in Dallas, so I kissed you and—"

"And it was some kiss, I'd say! Unforgettable." Dean grinned. "Tia, baby, I wasn't smart enough to make the first move. I'm really glad you did."

"So, if you liked me *that way*, why didn't you? I mean, did you think I'd say *no*?"

"Yeah, I guess." Dean gave a light shrug. "I didn't want to put any pressure on you and, quite honestly, I didn't know if you felt the same way about me."

"How do you feel about me now?" It was Tia's turn to raise an eyebrow. She studied his face, but couldn't read his expression.

Dean released her hand and rose to his feet. She watched in silence as he stepped around the coffee table to the player and reloaded it with *The Traveling Wilburys*, a CD which she fondly recalled was one of his favorites in her collection.

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Depressing the 'start' button, he listened to the tune a minute, and then began to pace the carpet like a restless animal. He appeared deep in thought. However, his unreadable mood made her uneasy. Tia's heart pounded hard in her chest, curious as to how he'd answer her question. *Maybe I shouldn't have asked.*

After a few awkward moments, the dark-haired cowboy cleared his throat. "Do you remember the big Fourth of July picnic last summer before I got the job offer in Dallas?"

"*Si*, it was so much fun," she recalled with a smile.

"Now, I'm no saint...sure, I've dated other gals. But, Tia, it was then I began to wonder if you were the one for me. You're the only person I've been really comfortable with. Do you know what I mean?"

Tia shifted uneasily on the couch, grabbing a pillow and clutching it to her stomach. "Of course, I'm your friend. That's why you feel the way you do, Dean."

"No, you're something more." He'd stopped pacing and turned to face her. "You're like my favorite pair of jeans or my motorcycle...you're such a natural part of me."

"Oh! So now you're comparing me to jeans and a Harley!" Tia laughed, playfully rolling her eyes. "And I thought I was *loco*!"

Dean gave a light snicker, then grew serious again. "No, that's not what I mean, baby." With a swift move, he rounded the coffee table, stood close to her, then bent down on his knee. "Tia," he said, softly. "Believe me, you have always been more than a friend to me. And, after I left town, I realized something very important."

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"What's that?"

"Tia, I honestly believe we are meant to be together."

There was tightness in Tia's throat. She wasn't sure how to reply. She gazed into his deep, dark eyes and a flood of warmth was spread throughout her body by the tender expression on his face. Tia's heart pounded in her chest. Tossing aside the pillow, she slid to the edge of the couch and laid a hand to his bruised cheek. "Oh Dean," she replied, a quiver in her voice. "I had no idea you felt that way about me."

He gave a slow nod, a thin smile curving his lips, then curled a finger under her chin and closed the distance with his lips.

And then, he kissed her.

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Chapter Five

She leaned into his kiss, deepening the connection between them. When her tongue slid between his lips, Dean's heart skipped a beat. It was what he'd silently wished for. She was everything—smart, beautiful and, even sometimes, a bit feisty. He wanted to absorb her essence into every cell of his being. Wrapping his arms around her, they tumbled back onto the softness of the old couch. He pulled his lips from hers and gazed down into her face. Her jet black hair was tousled around her face, framing her lovely Hispanic features.

"I was selfish for leaving you like I did," he confessed. "I'm sorry, baby."

"And I was totally *loco* too, thinking I had ruined our friendship by jumping your bones." Tia pursed her lips.

"Oh, Hell, no!" Dean chuckled. "Like I said, I'm glad you did." Before she could reply, he captured her mouth once more, savoring the sensuality of her full, luscious kiss. Her sweetness teased his senses. Thrusting his tongue into her mouth, he tasted her desire. And, the more heated their kisses became, the stronger his body reacted. Before long, the white-hot blood in his veins flooded his lower extremities making his cock thick and rock hard against the denim fly of his jeans.

"I want you!" he panted, covering her flushed cheeks with tiny kisses.

"Bedroom," she uttered a breathless, one-word reply.

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Without wasting time, Dean rose to his feet, and then scooped her up, effortlessly carrying her to the room just past the kitchenette. Using the pointed toe of his boot, he gently nudged the door open. Her bedroom was just as he'd remembered it. A double-sized bed with a lavender coverlet took up the small space. He inhaled deeply, taking in the rich scent which was all hers and carefully lowered her onto the mattress.

Dean eagerly kissed her again, while they quickly stripped away their clothing until they both were naked. The muted light of a streetlamp outside the window cast a soft glow over her amber skin. He drew a deep breath, taking in her beauty, then pressed his body to hers against the downy sheets.

His bare, naked chest rubbed against her exposed breasts. Lush and supple, her breasts were those of a goddess. A deep moan escaped from Tia, her nipples tightening to hard peaks by the delicious friction between them. Tia rose slightly from the mattress and tossed her head back, offering him the smooth column of her neck. A flicker of devilishness sparked within him as Dean began to alternate between hot kisses and playful nips down her throat.

"*Dios mio!*" Tia gasped, wiggling beneath him. "I-I want you too." To accent her point, she wrapped a long leg around his bare bottom, drawing him closer to her. Her soft muff brushed his cock, teasing him senseless. Dazed, he looked down into her face. In the golden glow of the room, Tia's expression mirrored the white-hot lust churning inside him. Her kiss-swollen lips were parted. She was breathing hard, her eyes wide with sexual desire.

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"Oh, please, cowboy..." The erotic heat in her voice was making him even harder.

* * * *

Tia'd had lovers before, but no one made her feel like Dean. The way he dominated her in bed made her so wet and willing. His passionate kisses and the hot touch of his bare skin were enough to melt down her self-imposed, emotional barriers.

Her plea seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, but the handsome cowboy straddling her naked body merely grinned and shook his head.

"No, not yet," he replied an animalistic growl. Her senses prickled as he wrapped a hand around both of her wrists, he drew her arms above her head. Tia let out a low moan. Her tight budded nipples were bared to him. His gaze dropped to her breasts and a slow smile curled over her lips. As if reading her mind, Dean glided from her neck to capture a pert nipple with his tongue. Tia sank her teeth into her bottom lip to stifle another moan. He laved it with slow, sensual strokes, before giving the other his attention.

As his mouth nipped and teased her breasts, Tia's body arched into him, relishing the sensations which escalated throughout her. The pleasure was overwhelming. Her senses were reeling with desire. Tia gave a deep moan of approval as Dean let go of her hands. In a desperate attempt for self-control, she drew a ragged breath and reached out, taking hold of his taut shoulders. Strong muscles moved beneath his warm flesh.

Dean paused, pulling back. She let out a mew of disappointment. He gave a good-natured chuckle. "I thought you'd like that." The surety in his deep, husky voice sent a shiver through her body. Then, through her erotic haze, she sensed him shift his position.

Tia held her breath, curious. They'd only been together once before, but even though his foreplay was hot and teasing, he was certainly very thorough and sensual with his lovemaking. The cowboy instinctively knew just how to please her.

She stirred beneath the gentle touch of his weathered hands as he grazed her hips and moved further down her body. Each heated stroke of his palms was followed closely by his eager mouth, making his way along her thighs. The heady combination kicked her desire up a notch.

"*Dios mio!*" She gasped, feeling the flick of his tongue edging closer and closer now to her slick pussy. Excitement coursed through her with a tingle of anticipation. She spread her legs to bring him closer.

"You're so beautiful," she heard him mummer from between her thighs. In the dim light, she blushed. Before she could reply, the full wetness of his tongue stroked over the moist folds of her sex. Tia arched her back with intense pleasure, rising up off the mattress a few inches. A wild, unintelligible sound escaped from her lips. It was primal, raw and filled with need.

Tia's hand reached out, gripping the comforter tight for self-control. His tongue was making slow, lazy circles over her clit, shooting white-hot sparkles up her spine and ensnaring

her senses. She closed her eyes, her breath coming in heated pants.

She was dangling on the brink, wild sensations rippling through her body.

It was all too much.

"Oh, Dean, please," Tia whimpered, wiggling against him. "Not yet..."

Her eyes fluttered open when he stopped. In the dim light of the room, she watched him rise up from her parted thighs with a devilish smile. Her gaze roamed down his well-toned torso, then zeroed in on his fully erect cock. Nestled between his solid thighs, it was thick and plump, its flared tip moist with a bead of pre-cum.

He was as ready for her as she was for him.

Dean lay over top of her, covering her with his taut body and took her in his arms. He placed a tender kiss to her lips, gliding his cock to the slick opening of her pussy. Tia was eager for him to plunge into her. The heat between them grew more intense.

She wanted him inside her so bad, she ached.

Angling his hips, he slid into her with one firm stroke. Tia gasp, the hard length of his penis filling her.

And she welcomed every inch of him with a wet, tight embrace.

His cock deep inside her, Dean let out a groan. A giggle of pure joy escaped from her lips. Tia's hips rose off the mattress and solidified the erotic connection between. Her pussy tightened around him, gripping the entire length of him like a glove.

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He paused a moment as if to give her body a chance to accommodate his impressive size. But Tia knew his cock was a perfect fit. Panting, she tightened her legs around his back.

"Now, ride me, cowboy," she coaxed, whispering in his ear. Dean began to thrust, his hips setting a natural, fluid pace.

Tia closed her eyes, the world around her dissolving into unspeakable bliss, except for the stimulating sensations swirling inside her. She was so wet and eager. It didn't take but a few long, deep strokes of Dean's cock inside her. With a soft cry, Tia's first orgasm rippled through her and she gave in to its awesome wave of pleasure.

"Good God!" Dean groaned. She sensed his body go rigid over top of her. She knew he was struggling to stay buried deep inside her, riding out the swell of her intense climax. After the little storm inside her ebbed, Tia opened her eyes and looked up into his face. A smile curled Dean's lips. He'd held on and rode out her pleasure.

But his cock was still hard, buried deep inside her.

"Do you think you can hold on for another round, cowboy?" She gently teased. Her pulse already quickened, ready for more.

"Oh, yes." His reply was no more than a ragged whisper. "But, I can't hold out too much longer, baby."

Dean released her, and then slid his palms down her heated body to cup her round bottom. A wild look in his eyes made her quiver. Her excitement peaked again. Then, he began to thrust inside her once more. They were wanton, untamed movements, guiding his cock deeper into her, fast and hard.

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Panting, Tia ground her hips in sync with his strokes. White-hot lust rushed through her body while he strove toward his own climax. She gasped as another pleasurable wave crashed through her. With a throaty cry, Tia arched her back and her second orgasm shot through her. She closed her eyes as pleasure filled every part of her being, then felt Dean feverishly stroking inside her. His breath was no more than hot, animalistic pants. Then, he gave a wild grunt, coming inside her and filling her to the brim.

The air stirred around her. Tia opened her eyes. Dean rolled off her prone body and landed with a soft *thump* beside her, attempting to catch his breath. She reached for a tissue on the bedside table, and then pulled the tousled comforter from the edge of the mattress, covering their naked bodies.

Filled with unspeakable bliss, Tia snuggled in beside her cowboy and drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

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Chapter Six

Dean awoke with a start and squinted as a shaft of sunlight beamed through the sheer curtains of the small bedroom. A dog barked in the distance, somewhere outside the window. He figured it was just after sunrise. Rolling on his side, he smiled down at Tia, sleeping soundly with her back to him, the lavender comforter wrapped around her bare waist.

For a moment, he watched her sleep and was grateful the previous night hadn't been just a dream. But it was like the ones he'd had during those lonely nights at the ranch, only to wake up to an empty bed and a heavy heart.

How could I've been such an ass, leaving her behind? A renewed sense of determination flickered through his veins. Well, it won't happen again...I swear.

Quiet as a church mouse, he rolled out of bed and tip-toed to the door. Closing it behind him, he made his way to the bathroom while memories of the previous evening replayed in his head. Dean stared into the mirror over the sink, spearing a hand through his tousled hair. The bruise beneath his eye was making a speedy recovery ...more so than his heart. One way or another, he would convince Tia that they could have a future together.

After brushing a finger of toothpaste over his teeth, he headed to the kitchenette and started a pot of coffee. While the coffeemaker gurgled and hissed, he slid back into the bedroom. Tia was still curled on her side. The rhythmic rise

and fall of her shoulders signaled she may be still asleep. The lovely curves of her backside drew his attention.

Dean stifled a groan, his cock stirring to life. Climbing back into the bed beside her, he slid an arm around her waist and drew her back to his chest. Tia let out a sleepy groan. He smiled, relishing how good she felt spooned against him. His cock nestled against the crack of her round bottom.

"Tia?" he whispered in her ear. "Are you asleep?"

"No, not anymore." Her voice was soft and still groggy. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"Mmm...yeah." A smile curled his lips. Dean brushed aside the thick mass of dark hair which cascaded down her back and brushed a tender kiss to her temple. "But I don't feel like moving. I like it right here." He rolled his hips, accenting his point.

"I'm sure you do." She gave a giggle, wiggling her bottom against his cock. The stimulating sensation made him grow harder. He glided his hand from around her waist to cup a breast. Her nipples were already hard, her breathing becoming deeper, more aroused.

Dean lowered his lips to her neck and planted a gentle kiss. The exotic scent of her filled his nostrils. He wanted her again. His hand massaged over her breasts and tenderly toyed with her nipples. Tia let out a mew, her naked body squirming against him. Dean chuckled, holding her tight in his embrace. He rubbed his hard cock to her bottom and sensed a familiar warmth radiating from between her legs.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're nothing but trouble?" Tia giggled again, sounding more fully awake.

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"All the time, baby." Dean glided his hand from her breast, over her smooth belly to the spot between her legs. She let out a gasp as his finger stroked over the moist folds of her sex. Tia shifted on the mattress, allowing him better access. Dipping and stroking over her pussy, Dean ached to plunge into her wetness and feel her pussy clutch every inch of his cock. Just the thought made his cock twitch in response.

He was so wrapped up in the sensations of their bodies that he let out a grunt of disapproval when Tia pulled away. "What the—"

"Hold on, cowboy." She purred, gently pushing him onto his back with an open palm. He gazed up at her in surprise. In the early morning light, she was still beautiful. Her jet-black hair glistened in the golden rays and her eyes shone bright as she drew her tongue over her luscious lips. Tia rolled onto him, curling her long legs on each side of his hips and sat up, straddling his chest.

His pulse quickened. "Oh, yeah!" Dean grinned up at her, running his palms up her arms to caress her shoulders. "You're reading my mind, baby."

"Uh-huh." She nodded, then leaned forward, capturing his mouth in a full, delicious kiss. Her mouth moved against his, sucking and nipping at his lips. Desire shot from his heart, straight to his cock. He felt the wet heat of her sex brush against his groin. A low groan escaped from his lips, the lust coiling deep inside him like a wild animal.

"Oh please, Tia..." He pled when she broke their dueling-tongued kiss.

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She smiled, rose slightly to adjust her hips, then plunged onto his cock with a silken motion. White-hot lust shot through his veins at the velvety heat which surrounded his cock. Tia moved on top of him, her palms pressed against his chest, holding her steady. Dean felt as if he would combust from the fire which consumed him from head to toe.

His cock buried deep inside her, he sensed the tightness of her muscles, her body heating around him. Tia panted, but made no move to stop. She was riding his cock with a wild abandon which could've put a bronco-buster to shame. Dean slid his hands to her hips, holding onto her for dear life. The wild slaps of their bodies moving together were a sexual symphony.

"God, Tia, I can't hold back!" he panted, his senses spiraling out of control under her dominating presence. Deep inside, her pussy clutched wildly at his cock, and then Tia tossed back her head. Letting out a groan, her climax rippled through her pussy and reverberated through his cock. The sensations shook him to the core and sent him over the edge. His hips bucked between her thighs and he came with a wild yelp of indescribable rapture.

* * * *

Lying back against the pillow, her breathing gradually returned to normal, but every part of Tia's body was deliciously relaxed and satisfied. The cowboy in the bed beside her had totally rocked her world...and turned it upside down. She rolled over on her side, studying his well-toned, naked body all the way up to the features of his handsome

face. His eyes were shut. She couldn't tell if he had dozed back off.

As quietly as she could, Tia rose from the bed and found her t-shirt, which had hastily been discarded the night before on the floor. While sliding it over her head, Dean stirred on the mattress.

"Let me guess, you're going for coffee." He winked, the corners of his mouth curling up into a knowing smile.

She nodded. "Would you like a cup too?"

"Oh, no thanks. I made it just for you." He settled back onto the mattress, closing his eyes again. "I know how you love coffee first thing in the morning. Well, *almost* the first thing."

Tia laughed, feeling her cheeks warm with color. Yet she had no regrets about rolling on top of Dean and riding him like a wild woman. None whatsoever. In fact, she was happy. Truly happy.

Making her way to the kitchenette, she proceeded to fix herself a large mug of coffee, then padded into the living room. With a smile, she sank down onto the couch, thinking about the night before. Dean's confession had been more than she could handle. The cowboy had certainly raised the stakes on their relationship with his confession.

I honestly believe we are meant to be together

Her heart thumped harder in her chest. The cowboy had a way of making her totally *loco*. Tia gave a soft sigh. Yet the way he'd kissed her and made love to her had melted away some of her doubts and worries. But still ...did he really mean it?

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She took a big gulp of coffee, hoping it would give her a good jolt and cut through the erotic haze which enveloped her senses. Just being close to him again had begun to stir up old, fond memories of their past together. Their friendship had been genuine and relaxed. There was no pressure from Dean for her to be like other gals. And she always felt the same about him, letting him just be himself.

Tia snickered, remembering how Dean'd compared her to his favorite jeans and his motorcycle the night before. It was an odd comparison, but a heartfelt one. Tia knew him well enough to know he was telling the truth and was touched.

Still, she had to be sure he'd meant what he said. Rising from the couch, she abandoned her coffee mug and headed back to the bedroom. Slowly opening the door, she paused, taking in the glorious sight of the handsome cowboy sprawled out on her bed. Her libido stirred, but she quelled the sensations and stepped into the sunlit room.

Dean's prone body shifted on the bed, but his eyes didn't open. A slow smile spread over his lips.

"Hey, cowboy, are you asleep?" she whispered.

"Hmm ...no, just relaxing a bit." His eyes fluttered opened. "I'm pretty sure you wore me out between last night and this morning, though." A wide, silly grin replaced his sleepy expression.

"Ha-ha! Very funny!" Tia laughed, leaning over the mattress and gave him a light punch on the arm. Dean suddenly rolled over, wrapping his strong arms around her and pulled her onto the mattress with him. Her heartbeat quickened, yet the lingering question nagged at her. "Dean,

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can we be serious a moment?" She grew still in his arms. The warm, musky scent of him filled her senses and threatened to cloud her mind. Tia drew a deep breath for control.

"Sure, baby." He shifted on the mattress. "What's on your mind?"

"Well, I've been thinking about what you said last night."

"And?" There was tightness in his voice. Tia's stomach gave a nervous flip. She exhaled, turning to face him. He was intently studying her face, his grin had faded. "Go on," he nodded, gently coaxing her.

"Well, I was wondering, do you really think we can be both friends and lovers?" She asked, raising an eyebrow.

Dean's brow furrowed. He appeared deep in thought for a moment, and then he cleared his throat. "Sure, I believe we can. Like I said, Tia, you're the one for me. I've been a real ass for not realizing it sooner. I guess I was afraid you didn't feel the same way about me, then you knocked me off my feet that last night before Dallas and..." His voice trailed off.

A wave of overwhelming emotion flooded her heart. Tia shook her head. "No, I'm really sorry I didn't let you know sooner, Dean."

"Shh..." He gently hushed her. "That's all in our past now. Forgive and move on, right?" Tia nodded, then he pulled her closer and captured her mouth in a kiss. He tasted of mint toothpaste and the very sweetness of his soul. Tia curled her toes, attempting to shrug off the sensations the cowboy was rekindling deep inside her. Then, Dean pulled his lips from hers, leaving her breathless and panting. He smiled and continued. "But, for the time being, I'm back in town and we

have a chance to start over again. That is, if you want to, baby."

"But you'll only be in town for a couple of weeks to help out Buck and Linda. When Hank gets back, then you'll be off to Dallas again." She frowned.

"Yeah, Mrs. Carson expecting me back at the ranch as soon as I'm done here." Dean nodded. "But, I've been thinking it over, Tia. By springtime, Linda and Buck will be retiring to Florida and The Green Lizard will have a new owner."

"And I may be out of a job, too," she added.

"But, think about it. You'll be graduating from your online class and have your diploma soon. So, why don't we plan for you to move in with me?"

Tia blinked, staring into Dean's deep dark gaze. "Do you mean leaving Westbrook and moving in with you in Dallas?" She pulled away from his embrace, sitting upright on the edge of the bed.

"Well, yes." He sat up beside her and took hold of her hand. "You can find a job in Dallas and, as far as our relationship goes, well, I promise we can take it slow and easy. One step at a time. That is, if you want to. Do you, baby?"

Tia couldn't believe what she was hearing. Dean wanted her to be with him—as both his friend *and* his lover.

And, deep down, she wanted him, too.

All her doubts and uncertainty seemed to evaporate like a cloud, leaving her feeling crystal clear about her relationship

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with the handsome cowboy. Excitement bubbled deep inside her.

"Si! I'll do it! I mean, we'll do it...together!" She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and drew him into a big, wet kiss. Dean let out a low, feral growl in the back of his throat and pulled her back down onto the lavender mattress. Snuggled up again in his loving embrace, Tia gazed up into his handsome face. Her heart leapt with joy in her chest.

"You know, you're right, cowboy. We've been friends for so long, why can't we be lovers too?"

"That's my gal." Dean winked, a wicked grin tugging at the corners of his sexy lips.

"But, there's one thing I want you to remember."

"And what's that, missy?" He body tensed as he raised an eyebrow.

Tia giggled, then continued, "Well, they may call you 'trouble', cowboy, but I want you to remember that you're all mine!"

"Absolutely!" Dean agreed and sealed her lips with a kiss.

The End

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About the Author

Sabrina Luna lives in Charlotte, NC and is an author of paranormal and erotic romance. She invites you to visit her website at www.sabrinaluna.com.

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