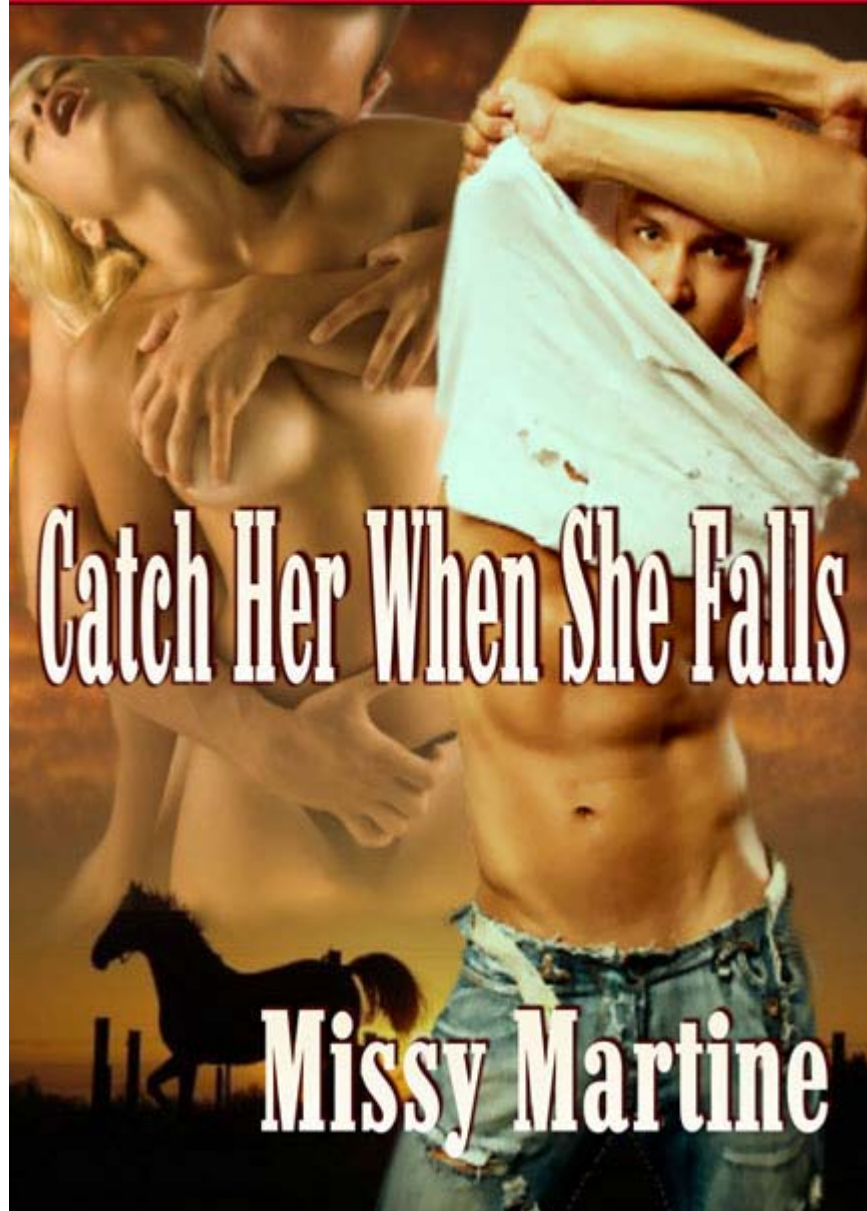


Siren Publishing

Ménage Àmour



Sequel to *Table for Three*

Catch Her When She Falls

Serena Dammler is recovering from a savage beating and needs protection. Cowboys and lovers Marc Weller and Tony Estabon are taking jobs as bounty-hunters, and their newest assignment is to capture her attacker and return him to Texas. They take one look at Serena's fragile beauty and decide she'd be the perfect third to their family.

Serena's always dreamed of catching herself a rich man, and she'd do just about anything to make that dream come true. She's not going to allow herself to fall in love with her two cowboy protectors, no matter how sexy they are.

Marc and Tony want Serena as their third, but they want her love to be real and not based on their bank accounts. So what will it hurt if they take her to a little cabin on their ranch and pretend to be simple cowboys?

Genre: Contemporary, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Western/Cowboys

Length: 59,252 words

CATCH HER WHEN SHE FALLS

Sequel to Table for Three

Missy Martine

MENAGE AMOUR



**Siren Publishing, Inc.
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DEDICATION

Thanks to the many friends who wrote asking for Serena's story. And a special thanks to Stormy Glenn, whose advice helped me polish up the romance in my book. To my husband, thanks love for putting up with me through another writing marathon. You're the best.

CATCH HER WHEN SHE FALLS

Sequel to Table for Three

MISSY MARTINE

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Prologue

Serena sighed, staring out the office window. Rage threatened to overwhelm her as she watched David and Matt Carlisle drive off with Cass Abernathy. For months she'd tried everything to seduce the handsome twin brothers, only to have all her hopes dashed in one afternoon. *What the hell can they possibly see in her? She's not pretty by anybody's standards. Hell, she's too old for them.*

Cass Abernathy had come to the small town of Mountain Vista a few weeks earlier to claim an inheritance when her uncle died. Serena worked for the attorney handling the estate, the same attorney who'd introduced the divorced woman to Matt and David. The brothers had devoted all their time to Cass since that introduction.

Serena heard the door open on the private office of her boss, Oliver Barrett III. When he came out of his office, she returned to her desk and looked up at him expectantly.

"Serena, I'm going to be out the rest of the day. Please stay until lunchtime to take any messages, and then you can have the rest of the day off. But remember to be here early tomorrow. I have a stack of letters that need to go out." Without bothering to wait for a response, Oliver turned and walked out the door.

Serena watched him from the window. When she saw him drive away, she hurried into his private office. Crossing to the filing cabinet, she opened the appropriate drawer and pulled the folder marked *August Laughlin*. She carried the documents back to her own desk, thinking about what she was about to do. She'd overheard conversations between Oliver and the detective he'd hired to find Cass and knew the divorced woman was hiding from someone. Blinking back the tears forming in her eyes, Serena thought back to the look on Matt's face when he'd first met Cass out front on the sidewalk. Just once, she wanted someone to look at her like that.

She sat down and looked at the folder in her hand. *Can this really work? If Cass isn't in the picture anymore, they'll have to notice me. Won't they?*

She carefully went through the file looking for the reports from the private investigator. After several minutes of flipping through pages, she found what she needed. She quickly scanned the document, amazed at the amount of information Oliver had discovered regarding Cass's life.

"Okay, here we go. Contact numbers for her ex-husband, his family, and some neighbor of Cass's. I'll just bet that ex-hubby would just love to know where he could find his charming wife now." Pressing a hand against her stomach to squelch the uneasy feeling, Serena swallowed hard, picked up her cell phone and started dialing.

Chapter 1

Serena locked her car door and glanced up at the sound of laughter. With heaviness in her chest, she watched Cass enter the hardware store snuggled between Matt and David Carlisle. With a sigh, she walked over and picked up the newspaper lying on the ground. Blinking back tears, she unlocked the office door and went inside.

It had only been a few days since she'd run into the three of them at the diner where they'd devastated her with the news they were getting married. She'd done every underhanded thing she could to break them up and nothing had worked. She had to admit she'd never seen anyone look more in love, and it filled her with a longing that consumed her every thought. It shamed her to think of the phone call she'd made a couple of weeks back. She'd pinned all her hopes on Cass's ex-husband coming to get her. *I guess he really doesn't care anymore.* For all she knew, his brother never gave him the message. He'd seemed annoyed to even hear Cass's name. Unfortunately, he'd been the only person on the list she'd been able to reach.

Putting her purse away, Serena listened to the messages on the machine and then went to start the coffee. It felt strange working with a new attorney. The Oregon Bar Association had sent Alexander Peroit to close out all of Oliver's open cases. The whole town had fallen into a state of shock when Oliver Barrett III lost his mind and attacked Cass at the Carlisle twin's home. The authorities promptly arrested him on assault and embezzlement charges. He'd been hoping to woo Cass into a romantic relationship to take control of her uncle's

vast estate, one he'd already been dipping into. Her romance with Matt and David had pushed him over the edge.

Serena had agreed to stay on for ninety days, helping the young attorney close out the office. Single, handsome, and successful, he was everything she desired in a man. Unfortunately, he'd made it clear from the beginning that he had someone special back home and wasn't interested in anything more than a working relationship. He'd softened the blow by praising her abilities as a legal secretary and an offer of a job should she ever decide to move to Portland. They worked really well together, and his approval warmed her. There hadn't been much of that in her life.

While she waited for the coffee to brew, Serena opened the newspaper and gaped at the headline story. *Local Attorney Jailed After Romantic Altercation*. "Talk about misleading headlines. Makes it sound like he had a spat with his lover." She sat down to read the story and gasped. *Cass Abernathy moved to Mountain Vista following a bitter divorce from her first husband. Eric Abernathy, a resident of Texas and recently paroled, served time for the assault of his wife.*

"That's why he never called me. He's in jail." She glanced down at the paper. "Well, he was in jail. I guess he's out now." Continuing to read, Serena felt her stomach tighten. The reporter had really done his homework. He'd included descriptions of Cass's beating and details of her husband's trial. "God, what have I done? Eric could still show up here. What if I led him straight to Cass's door? What am I gonna do? I don't wanna be responsible for anyone getting hurt." Her hands clenched into fists, mauling the newspaper. "He'll come looking for her," she whispered. "Men like that never give up. He'll want someone to pay, and I've told him just where to find her." She could feel her hands shaking. She'd never told anyone about her life after her mother died. She'd moved out of her stepfather's house the day she turned eighteen.

“She’s gotta be warned. She needs to be on the lookout for him.”
Matt and David will be furious with me. But does it really matter as long as they keep her safe?

“Good morning, Serena.” Alex Peroit walked into the office, a cheerful smile on his face. “How are you this beautiful Oregon morning?”

“Not as good as you, apparently.” Serena laughed. “You seem awfully chipper. Is there a reason for all this annoying cheer?”

“Just happy to be alive.” He gave her a sheepish grin. “And my lady is driving up tonight to spend the weekend with me.”

“Ahhh, the truth comes out.” She smiled. “It’s nice to see you so happy, Alex.”

“Thanks. Is the coffee done?”

“Sure. Go ahead and put your stuff away, and I’ll bring it to you.” Quickly pouring a cup, Serena frowned as she put in the three teaspoons of sugar he liked. “How anybody can drink all that sweetness is beyond me,” she muttered, carrying the cup into his office. Refusing to meet his eyes, she cleared her throat. “Would it be all right if I stepped out for a few minutes? There’s something I really need to take care of this morning.” She knew she couldn’t live with the guilt if anything happened to Cass because of what she’d done.

Alex didn’t say anything until Serena raised her eyes. Looking thoughtful, he nodded. “Sure, but try not to be too long. We’ve got two depositions today for divorce cases, and I’ll need you to take dictation.”

“No problem, boss. I’ll hurry back.” Serena threw the words over her shoulder as she left, heading to the hardware store next door.

* * * *

Nervously, Serena pushed open the door and glanced over to the counter. Matt and David turned at the sound of the door chime, their smiles quickly turning to scowls. Refusing to back down, Serena

walked over to where they stood. “Hey guys, can I talk to Cass alone for a minute?”

“What the hell for?”

“Absolutely not.”

Serena cringed as both men refused her request at the same time. “Please? It’s really important.”

Matt looked at his brother and shrugged before turning his attention back to Serena. “What’s this all about?”

She eyed the young woman working behind the register briefly before answering. “It’s personal, Matt. I promise it won’t take long. I’m not here to cause trouble.”

David stepped forward. “Come on. She’s in the office. You can talk to her, but we’re coming with you.” He started toward the back of the store. “Martha, hold down the fort for a little while. We won’t be long.”

Serena followed the brothers to a little office in the very back of the store where Cass sat adding numbers on a calculator. She looked up and smiled as they came into the room, her smile changing to a look of surprise when she caught a glimpse of Serena. “Hi, Serena. What’s going on?”

Gripping her hands together tightly, Serena looked Cass in the eye. “A couple of weeks ago I let your ex-husband know where to find you.” Ignoring the men’s incredulous looks, Serena spent several minutes telling them about her phone calls to Cass’s former family.

“What the hell is wrong with you, woman?” David yelled. “How could you do something so reckless?”

“David, please,” Cass begged. She turned her attention to Serena. “Did you talk to Eric?”

“No, I talked to his brother. He said he’d give Eric the message.”

Cass snorted. “I’m sure Kevin will tell him exactly what you said. They’re like two peas in a pod. It’s hard to know which one of them is meaner.”

Matt whirled around and glared at Serena. "You've gone too far this time. Do you have any idea what this man's capable of? Do you even care if something happens to the woman we love?"

"I'm so sorry," Serena whispered. She wiped furiously at the tears sliding down her cheeks.

"Enough," Cass yelled. She gave her men a hard look and pointed toward the door. "Both of you, out. Now. I want to talk to Serena alone."

"Wait a minute," David began.

"Out. Now," Cass, argued. "I'm a big girl, and I can take care of myself. I'll be perfectly safe here in the office. Go stand guard out front where it'll do some good." Both women watched as the men reluctantly left them alone. Cass turned and motioned for Serena to take a seat, and then surprised her by sitting down on the couch next to her. She took Serena's hand in her own. "I'm grateful you came and told me what you did, but I have to ask you something." Her voice was soft, almost comforting. "Why did you do it? What did you hope to gain?"

"I'm so sorry, Cass," she sobbed. "I just wanted to make them love me." She grabbed two tissues out of the box Cass held for her. "I thought if you reconciled with your husband you'd go back to Texas. With you gone, I figured the guys would be willing to give me a chance." She gripped Cass's hand tighter. "I didn't know you'd been beaten, Cass. I just thought you were divorced like a thousand other people. I never meant you any harm, I swear. I just wanted you to go away."

"How did you get Eric's number?"

"It's in the report from the private investigator Oliver hired to find you."

"It gives the details of my divorce?"

"No, it only gave contact numbers for family members and neighbors."

"Okay, I'm confused. How did you know Eric's so mean?"

“Have you seen this morning’s newspaper?”

Cass frowned. “No, I usually spend time reading it at night before bed. Why?”

Serena rubbed her hand across her neck. “The headline story is all about Oliver’s arrest.” She cleared her throat. “It gives the details of what he tried to do to you, and your background.”

The color drained from Cass’s face. “You’re telling me everyone in Mountain Vista is reading about my ex-husband beating the crap out of me with their morning coffee?” Her voice had risen to a shriek.

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry.” Serena stood and started toward the door.

Cass quickly stood and grabbed her arm to pull her into a hug. “No, honey. It’s okay. It’s not your fault, and I believe you didn’t mean to do me any real harm.”

“What’s going on?” David cried, rushing through the door with Matt on his heels. “Why did you scream?” He frowned when he saw Serena in Cass’s arms.

“I didn’t scream,” Cass said. “We’ve got to do some damage control, guys. Any suggestions?”

Serena wondered why Cass didn’t tell the brothers about the newspaper, but decided not to question it. “You probably don’t need to do anything. I made the call two weeks ago, and nobody called back or showed up. Seems like they really don’t care where you are now.”

“You’re probably right, but it never hurts to be safe.” Cass looked up at Matt. “Eric is on parole now, and he’s not supposed to leave the state without permission.”

“Baby, why don’t you give your lawyer a call and ask him to let Eric’s parole officer know about the phone call? He can keep a closer watch on him for while.” Matt pulled Cass into his arms, smoothing the hair away from her face.

“That’s a good idea.” Cass smiled at Serena. “It’s okay, sweetie. Don’t worry about anything. We’ll make a phone call, take a few

extra precautions, and everything will be fine.” She pulled away and hugged the younger woman. “You go on back to work now. I’m not mad at you, I promise.”

Serena took a deep breath, and gave Cass a shaky smile. “Okay, thanks, Cass. I swear I’ll never do anything like that again.” She looked up at Matt and David. “I’m really happy for you guys.” Before they could say anything else, Serena walked out and headed back to work.

* * * *

“All right, Quinton. I’ll check it out, but I don’t think there’s any reason for worry. Eric is a model parolee. Never missed a scheduled appointment or a day on the job I found for him. Hell, he’s even seeing an anger-management counselor.” John Millerson massaged the bridge of his nose as he listened to the attorney’s concerns. A parole officer for over twenty years, he’d been responsible for Eric Abernathy for the past three weeks.

“Have you seen him in the last twenty-four hours?”

“No, I haven’t seen him since Monday. His next scheduled appointment isn’t for another three days, but I don’t mind making a surprise visit on the job if it’ll alleviate Ms. Abernathy’s worries.” John looked up when the door to his office opened. He nodded, gesturing for his secretary to come inside and take a seat.

“I would very much appreciate that, John. Cass is a sweet woman, and I don’t want her to have to worry needlessly.”

“No problem at all. I make at least one unscheduled visit each month to all my charges. I’ll just put Eric on my list for today.”

“Great, just give me a call if there’s anything my client needs to know.”

“Will do, Quinton. Give my best to your lovely wife.”

“Thanks, John. I’ll keep in touch.”

John glanced at his secretary, and friend, of ten years. “Martha, I need you to get Carlisle Winters at Omnipress on the phone ASAP.”

“Omnipress? Let’s see, um, that would be Eric Abernathy. Do we have a problem?”

It never failed to amaze him how she kept all his client’s information straight in her head. “I don’t really think so. That was Quinton Darby on the phone. He represents Eric’s ex-wife, Cass Abernathy. Apparently they have reason to believe that Eric’s aware of Cass’s whereabouts now, and they want to make sure he stays put. Just get Carlisle on the phone and verify Eric’s been at work this week. Let him know I’m going to be stopping by this evening to check up on things, but make sure he knows not to let Eric know I’m coming.”

“Got it.” Martha hurried back out to her own desk. About twenty minutes later she walked back in, a huge frown marring her usually happy face. “We’ve got problems,” she announced.

“What’s wrong?”

“Carlisle says Eric called in sick the last two days.”

“Damn it, why didn’t he call me?”

“That’s not the worst of it.”

“Don’t make me drag it out of you one syllable at a time. What already?”

“I called his apartment and there’s no answer.”

“Call the manager—”

“Already done, boss. He said Eric’s car isn’t in his assigned parking spot. He didn’t know how long it had been gone.”

“Ask him to use his keys and check the apartment.”

“Again, already done. He said it just looks normal. There’s food in the fridge, clothes in the closet, and even his cable television is still hooked up.”

“Okay, that means he’s planning on coming back. He’s figuring on being back by Monday and doesn’t think anyone will notice his absence before then.”

“Do we notify the sheriff’s department?”

John snorted. “God, no. They won’t go across state lines for someone convicted of malicious mischief. It’ll just go on the books, and he’ll be taken into custody if they ever pull him over for a traffic ticket.” He thought for a moment. “I’m going to have to call in a favor on this one.”

“You don’t mean Marcus Weller, do you?”

“Is there anybody else that owes me so many favors?”

She laughed. “I don’t know, but are you sure you wanna use somebody of Marc’s caliber on something like malicious mischief?”

John sighed. “The man beat his wife severely in their front yard in full view of family and neighbors. I think someone of Marc’s caliber is perfect to make sure Eric finds his way home before he does any more harm.”

“How did you meet Marc?”

“I had a client about seven years ago who kept trying to lose himself in the system. Marc and Tony kept bringing him back. They’d just bought their ranch and were only doing small jobs on the side for extra capitol.”

“Who’s Tony?”

“They’re partners.” He glanced up at her eyes. “In every sense. They’ve been together for at least eight years, maybe longer. Marc received serious injuries in a DEA operation that went horribly wrong and had to retire. Tony up and retired right along with him, and they bought a cattle ranch. I think they only do jobs for special friends now.”

Martha shook her head and walked toward the door. “Too bad they’re partners.”

“Huh?” John asked, puzzled.

She stopped at the door and grinned. “Marc is too damn hot to be wasted on another guy.”

* * * *

Marcus Weller walked quickly across the yard heading for the barn. He knew he'd find his friend and lover, Tony, mucking out the stalls. The sounds of a shovel raking across the rough floorboards reached him before he entered the dusty interior.

Smiling, he took in the sight before him. Anthony Estabon, known to his friends as Tony, stood nearly six feet tall and weighed at least two hundred twenty pounds. He kept his coal black hair shaved nearly to the scalp and had brown eyes that darkened to midnight black when anger overtook him. His muscles bunched enticingly as he spread the clean straw in Hombre's stall. The olive colored skin of his naked back showed off the tribal tattoos he'd gotten five years ago.

Marc watched as sweat trickled down Tony's back disappearing beneath the leather belt at his waist. "Shit," he muttered, shifting and trying to make room in his jeans. After all their years together, the sight of that body still made his cock hard as a rock. "You haven't finished these stalls yet?" he asked.

Tony turned his head, eyeing his partner of eight years. "Fuck you, asshole."

Marc laughed. "I thought you'd never ask." He pushed Tony against the loft ladder, fusing their mouths together while he cupped the prominent bulge in his lover's jeans and squeezed. He could feel Tony shaking off his work gloves, and then impatient hands fumbled with the buckle on his belt. Marc smiled when Tony moaned into their kiss, his tongue licking and stroking inside his mouth.

Pulling away, Marc grabbed Tony's hips and turned him around, holding him tight against the wooden rungs of the ladder. Using both hands he squeezed his ass cheeks and then let his hands slide around his waist along the soft skin. Leaning closer, he traced up Tony's neck with his tongue and then nipped at his earlobe. "This ass is mine, lover."

"Then quit wasting time talking and start fucking."

Marc chuckled in his ear and then reached down and curled his hand around the cloth covered erection. Quickly, he unbuttoned Tony's jeans and then pushed them down past his hips. As usual, his lover hadn't bothered with underwear. He tugged and maneuvered Tony until they were all the way in the stall with the fresh hay. Marc ran his hands over the other man's muscled arms while he pressed kisses against his neck and back.

"Don't tease me, Marc, please."

Dropping to his knees, Marc leaned forward and tasted the drops of pre-come on Tony's taut belly and then took the head of his cock in his mouth. Reaching down, he unfastened his pants to relieve the pain in his own cum-filled balls. He began licking and sucking up and down his lover's shaft, his own cock jerking in response. Slowly he engulfed the tip and then traced the underside with his tongue. He let his lips run along Tony's balls and then pulled one tightly drawn sac into his mouth.

"God, Marc, I need you inside me, now."

Marc stuck out his tongue and trailed a long, slow path up from Tony's bellybutton to his right nipple, drawing the tight bud into his mouth and teasing it with his teeth. Closing his lips around the brown disc he flicked his tongue back and forth, eliciting a groan from the other man's lips.

"Marc, quit dicking around," Tony begged.

Marc turned Tony around and placed his body against the stall gate. He licked his way down his spine while his finger slid between the man's cheeks to rub against him. "You got any lube?"

"In my pocket," Tony growled.

Marc reached down and pulled the small tube from his jean pocket. He squeezed a fair amount onto the palm of his hand and then found the puckered hole with his finger and pushed in slowly. "Want to be inside you." He groaned.

"Then do it," Tony cried.

Marc added a second finger and pushed in deeper, rubbing inside him while Tony's ass clamped tightly around his fingers like a vise. Moaning, Tony pressed his hands against the wooden wall of the stall and shoved his ass back, practically growling when the fingers pulled away.

Laughing, Marc slicked up his straining shaft and pressed it against Tony's puckered opening. With no warning, he dropped his head back, closed his eyes and thrust balls deep into a fiery heaven.

Tony glanced over his shoulder. "Fuck me, you tease. I've been waiting for this all day."

"I'm gonna ride you so damn hard," Marc whispered, biting gently into Tony's shoulder.

"Go for it, cowboy. Ride me hard."

Marc rocked his hips slowly, enjoying the gripping warmth. "Fuck, you feel good."

"Faster, damn it. Harder," Tony begged.

Marc thrust fiercely, his fingers digging into Tony's hips. He reached around and wrapped his big, calloused hand around his lover's cock and began to stroke. He continued to fuck hard and fast as Tony moaned, pushing into his fist. "So fucking hot," he bit out.

Tony gasped. "I'm gonna..." One, two, three strokes was all it took. Marc held tightly as Tony bucked wildly and cried out. His cock shot thick strands of white cream all over his stomach and Marc's hand. He continued to stroke, pumping and milking every drop he could from Tony until the man went limp against him.

Marc's legs began to tremble, and every muscle in his body tensed up right before he came, jerking and shooting into the tight, hot body beneath him. With a hoarse cry, he shuddered and ground in deep. When his tremors stopped, he laid his head against the smooth skin of Tony's back and closed his eyes. Inhaling deeply, he took in the scent that kept his nightmares at bay.

"As good a lover as you are, you ain't no lightweight. You wanna give me a chance to breathe, good buddy?"

Marc chuckled, pulled out and slapped him on the ass. "Sorry, man. I got caught up in the moment."

Tony glanced toward the barn door. "I hope to hell Jeremy's not been getting an eyeful."

"Don't you trust me to protect you?"

"Shit, you already know the answer to that."

Marc smiled. "We've been protecting each other for a lot of years, and that's not about to change as far as I'm concerned." He gestured toward the house. "Jeremy took Warren and Kyle into town to pick up a truck load of feed. Said that there are privileges to being a foreman, and he wasn't about to load all those sacks."

"A man can't argue with that logic," Tony said with a smirk. Before he could say anything else, his partner's phone rang.

Marc looked at the display but didn't recognize the number. "Marcus Weller," he answered.

"Marc, John Millerson here. How are you?"

"Hello, John. I'm doing just fine. And yourself?"

"Couldn't be better. How's Tony doing? Are things going well with the ranch?"

"Tony's fine. The ranch is fine. So cut the bullshit, John. What's on your mind?"

"Never were much for small talk, were you?"

"Come on, John. You wouldn't be calling if something wasn't wrong. What's going on?"

"Okay, buddy, truth time. I need to call in one of those favors you owe me."

"I'm listening."

"I've got a runner I need picked up. He's probably heading for Oregon, and I need somebody to track and cage him and bring his happy ass home to me."

Marc pressed the button to put the phone on speaker. "Across state lines? Why aren't the cops going after him?"

"His conviction is for malicious mischief."

“Shit, you’re wasting time on him? Not to mention a favor.”

“Look, Marc, it’s a complicated case. He pleaded out to the malicious mischief to avoid a trial.”

“So what’s he really guilty of?”

“He beat the crap out his wife.”

“Damn, that’s hitting below the belt, if you’ll forgive the pun.”

John knew that Marc wouldn’t be able to turn this job down. His own mother died from a beating she received from his stepfather. “What are the details?”

“You haven’t changed your email address, have you?”

“No, it’s still the same. RetInTx424 at Comcast dot net.”

John laughed. “Okay, I’ve just sent you all the information you’ll need. He’s believed to be heading to Oregon to catch up with his ex-wife. He recently found out where she’s living, and my guess is he’s after a little payback for his jail time, not to mention the loss of his career.”

“How much of a head start does he have?”

“I can only give you an estimate. He’s missed two days of work, so he most likely left sometime late Tuesday or early Wednesday. He’s probably driving his own car. The particulars are in the email.”

“All right. We’ll get cleaned up and head out today. Does the ex know he’s on his way?”

“Oh, yeah. I spoke with her attorney right before I called you. He’s passing on the information but didn’t seem too worried. Said her men could most likely keep her safe.”

“Her men as in plural?”

“Yeah, the little Texas housewife went and found herself a ménage relationship.”

Marc shook his head and then grinned. “Well, good for her. Sounds like she’s recovering nicely.”

“Let’s get his ass back home quick and make sure her recovery is permanent.”

“Sure thing, John. I’ll call you when we catch up to him.” He hung up without waiting for the other man’s reply. He looked at his partner. “Got us a job, good buddy.”

“I heard. So, are we flying or driving?” Most people didn’t know that Tony owned Compan’s Oil. He had access to the company’s jet anytime he needed it.

“Let’s drive out. If we leave tonight, we can easily be there by Sunday afternoon. With a couple of guys to protect her, we don’t have to be in a big rush. I don’t know about you, but I could use a little relaxing time away from the ranch. It’s awfully pretty out there this time of the year.”

Tony snickered. “You need time away from our *End of the Road Haven*?” Both men had been working for the DEA when a gunshot wound forced Marc into retirement. He’d always wanted to own a cattle ranch. So with Tony’s help, they’d started up the *End of the Road Haven*.

“You know what I mean, asshole.”

Tony walked over and put his arms around Marc. “I know, lover. I miss the excitement, too.”

“Are you sorry you retired when I did?”

“Absolutely not! I’ve never even thought twice about my decision, Marc. I’ll never be happy unless I’m by your side.”

“Well, then, what say we go hunting and see what we can catch?”

Chapter 2

Alex walked out of his office and laid a file on Serena's desk. "You about ready to call it a day?"

Serena forced her attention away from her typewriter and gave him a big smile. "I just wanna finish up these last two letters before I head out."

"Come on, girl, it's the weekend. Don't you have a hot date or something?"

She bit her lip and tried to ignore the pain that settled around her heart. She didn't remember the last hot date she'd been on. "Sorry to disappoint you, but my plans for the weekend are pretty dull." She glanced at the computer. "Besides, I really want to finish this so I can start fresh on Monday."

His eyebrows drew together as his brow wrinkled. "Will you be okay here by yourself? I can stay if you need me to."

"I'll be fine, Alex. This is a small town, and with the exception of Oliver's meltdown, nothing ever happens." She flashed him a naughty grin. "Besides, you can't disappoint your lady. She's driving a long way for a booty call."

"Serena, it's not a booty call." He laughed. "Where do you come up with these phrases?"

"Please, spare me. She's not driving all this way just to see your smiling face."

"God, I hope not." He groaned. "You sure you'll be okay?"

"I'll be fine, Dad. Don't worry so much."

"Okay, then. I'll leave you to it. Don't stay too late, and try and have yourself a good weekend."

“Thanks, Alex. Enjoy your visit with Jennifer. You can give me all the down and dirty details on Monday,” she said with a smirk.

“In your dreams, Dammler.” Alex walked out the door without a backward glance.

* * * *

Serena had just put the finishing touches on her final letter when the outside door suddenly swung open, and a man she’d never seen before walked in. He had a muscular six foot frame with dark brown hair and eyes, and the most beautiful smile she’d ever seen. Unable to stop herself, Serena grinned. “Can I help you?”

His smile got even wider. “According to my brother, you already have. I’m Eric Abernathy, and I think you’ve got some information for me.”

Serena felt dizzy as beads of sweat broke out on her forehead and neck. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” *Oh, God. What am I going to do?*

Eric’s face became a mask of fury. “What’s your name?”

“S—Serena. Um, the office is closed for the weekend. You should probably come back Monday when the attorney is here.”

“Listen to me very carefully, Serena. I’ve come a long way, and I’m not leaving without getting what I came for.”

“What do you want?” Serena whispered.

“All I want from you is the address where I can find my wife.”

“She’s your ex-wife.” Serena cringed as he walked around the desk, and cried out when he took her arm in a painful grip.

“Quiet! Just tell me where to find her, and I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Why do you need to find her? She’s moved on with her life.”

Eric shook her roughly and then pulled her to her feet. “Damn it, what’s wrong with you? You told Kevin how much you wanted her

gone. I'm gonna take care of both our problems. Just tell me where she is, and I'll get rid of her for you."

Serena shook her head. "I can't do that." Roughly, he shoved her up against the wall, banging her head against a picture frame hard enough to break the glass. "Please, stop," she groaned, fighting back nausea and dizziness.

"You better listen up, bitch. You're gonna tell me everything I want to know, or I'll make you sorry you were ever born. There's no way I'm letting that slut wife of mine get away with everything she put me through. I've lost my friends, my job and my home, and now she's gonna pay." He shook her soundly and then spun around when the door opened.

Roberta Clements stood in the door, her mouth open in shock. She glanced at Serena and swallowed hard. When Eric released Serena and took a step toward the door, the woman turned and ran.

"Shit!" He turned and reached for Serena's arm. "She'll bring the police for sure. You're coming with me."

"No," Serena screamed as she ran around the other side of her desk trying to get to Alex's office to lock herself in. She didn't get two steps before Eric knocked her to the floor.

"I don't have time for this, you stupid bitch." He grabbed her arm and began dragging her toward the door.

"Oh, God, please don't." Serena reached out blindly and wrapped her arms around the leg of her desk, holding on with all her strength. *If I can hold on long enough, Mrs. Clements will send help.*

Eric's face darkened with rage as he pulled ineffectively at her arms. Leaning over, he punched her in the face twice and then tried to pull her to her feet. Stubbornly, she held onto her lifeline. "Shit," he growled, punching her in the stomach. "You just bought yourself a world of trouble, little girl. There's no way I'm gonna let another stupid female add more troubles to my life." Straightening, he raised his foot and kicked her viciously in the side and again in her upper

thigh. Turning, he headed for the door. "I'll catch up with you later. You can count on it." He left, leaving the door open behind him.

Serena heard the slamming of a car door and then tires squealing as he sped away. Trembling, she groaned and released her hold on the desk. She could barely see through her tears. Her body was one huge, massive ball of pain.

* * * *

Sheriff Calvin Burtram turned off the main highway, heading toward his little cabin and a big steak dinner. He could practically smell the charcoal from the grill when his radio blasted into his thoughts.

"Sheriff, you got your ears on?" The disembodied, nasally voice grated on his nerves.

He chuckled and reached for his mic. "Lisa, when are you going to stop using that antiquated CB jargon?"

She laughed. "About the same time you start using manners, Sheriff."

"What's up, Lisa? I hope this is your idea of a radio check."

"No such luck, big guy. Got a call from a Mrs. Roberta Clements. She stopped by Oliver Barrett's office to pick up a copy of her divorce papers and walked into what she says looks like a robbery."

Sheriff Burtram swung the car in a U-turn and headed back toward town. "She give any descriptions?"

"Just said some young guy was knocking Oliver's secretary around. Apparently, when he made a move toward her, she hightailed it out of there and found the nearest phone to call us."

"All right, Lisa. I'm ten minutes away. I'll get back to you when I check out the scene. Sheriff out." He threw down the mic, switched on his siren, and sped toward Main Street.

Ten minutes later, he approached the open door of the law office with caution. He'd drawn his gun before peering into the lighted

interior. The first thing he saw was a woman curled up on the floor in front of the desk. Her back was to him so he couldn't make out her face, but the blood smeared in her blonde hair had him reaching for his communicator. "Lisa, get me an ambulance over to 222 Main Street. Sheriff out."

"Help me?" The woman groaned.

Cautiously, the sheriff approached the inner office door. Once he'd checked the room and determined there was no one else in the office, he bent down next to the sobbing woman. "Shh, little lady. Help's on the way." He grimaced when he caught sight of her leg. The skirt she'd worn had ridden up and the imprint of a shoe clearly shown against the fair skin of her thigh. He reached down and pushed the hair away from her face, careful not to move her, and gasped. One of her eyes had swollen completely shut, her jaw was already turning blue, and her split lip trickled blood. The hair matted with blood on the back of her head indicated a head injury. "Damn, honey, somebody sure did a number on you. Can you tell me who did this?"

"Cass," the semiconscious woman groaned. "Need to tell Cass."

The sheriff listened to the sounds of a siren getting closer.

* * * *

"Can't you drive any faster?" Cass leaned forward in her seat, anxious to get to town and talk to Serena. "Do you think she's still at the office this late?"

David glanced at Matt in the rearview mirror, before cutting his eyes back to the road. "If she's not, we'll drive over to her apartment. What exactly did Mr. Darby say?"

Cass sighed. "He said Eric's missing. He hasn't been to work or at his apartment in a couple of days." She ran a hand through her hair. "They're assuming he's heading this way based on what we told them about Serena's phone call."

“Relax, baby. Assuming doesn’t mean anything. They’re just being cautious.” Matt massaged her tense shoulders from the back seat. “Try to keep positive thoughts. Eric wouldn’t be stupid enough to come here just because of something Serena said. He’s smarter than that.” He chuckled, raised his hands in surrender, and sat back in his seat when Cass turned and gave him a dirty look.

“Oh, shit,” David exclaimed.

“Oh, God, what’s going on?” Cass froze at the flashing lights on the vehicles parked in front of their store. “We’re too late,” she whispered.

“Calm down, baby, you don’t know that.” Matt rested his hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah, right. A police car and ambulance parked in front of her office could mean anything.” Cass had the door open and was climbing out almost before David stopped the car.

“Cass, wait, damn it.” Matt rushed to catch up with her.

“Hold it right there.” Sheriff Burtram held up his hand to stop Cass just inside the door.

“Is she all right?” Cass felt a tear slide down her cheek as she watched the EMTs checking Serena’s injuries.

“What happened, Calvin?” David walked up and slid his arm around Cass’s shoulders while Matt linked her fingers with his.

“Damned if I know, David.” He glanced at the other man. “Matt, what are you three doing here?”

“We came to warn her,” Cass whispered.

Sheriff Burtram frowned. “Warn her about what, Cass?”

“Eric did this.”

“You don’t know that for sure, baby.” Matt put his hand under her chin and raised her gaze to his.

“Somebody want to tell me what the hell’s going on?” The sheriff guided everyone away from the door as the ambulance crew prepared to wheel the gurney out with Serena. He put his arm out and stopped

them on their way out the door. "Tell the doc I'll be by in a little while to get a statement from her if she's able."

"Sure thing, Sheriff." The young man motioned for his partner to move forward, and they quickly loaded Serena into the ambulance. Within moments, it pulled away from the curb, siren blaring and lights flashing.

Sheriff Burtram turned back to Cass. "Okay, now. How about you tell me what's going on?"

Sighing, Cass told him what she knew about Serena's involvement with Eric. "She came to us this morning to apologize and warn us in case he came looking for me." Cass looked down at the blood on the floor. "He wouldn't have been very happy if she wouldn't tell him what he wanted to know."

"Great. Just what I need. Serena's causing trouble again." The sheriff walked out the door and stood on the sidewalk.

Cass glanced at both of her men, and then hurried outside to confront the sheriff. "What does that mean? Serena's causing trouble? You can't possibly believe this is her fault."

"Look, Cass." Calvin sighed. "You haven't known Serena as long as David, Matt and I have. She's been nothing but trouble since her mother passed away eight years ago. She's flighty and always stirring up things between folks. Hell, she's been trying her best to sink her claws into your own men ever since I've known her." He took off his hat long enough to drag his fingers through his hair. "Maybe, for once, she bit off more than she could chew, and it came back to bite her on the ass."

"Don't you think that's a little harsh?" David asked.

"No, I don't. Push a man far enough, and he's gonna push back. It's human nature, and although I don't condone it, I can certainly understand how it could happen."

"Sheriff Burtram, are you or are you not going to do whatever's necessary to catch my ex-husband?"

"If I get an all points on him from Texas, or if I get a positive identification from Serena, I'll start looking around. But until then, I've no reason to suspect him of being in the area. Besides, even if he is responsible for this, he's long gone by now."

David took a step forward. "Can't you just—?"

"Forget it, David." Cass glared at the sheriff. "Let's get outta here. I wanna get to the hospital and check on Serena." Without another word, she walked to their car and got in the front seat. She waited until Matt climbed in the back and David started the car. "He's wrong, you know."

"Look, Cass, I know you don't want to hear this, but Calvin does have a point."

Cass whirled around in the seat and stared at Matt skeptically. "And what point would that be?"

Matt sighed. "Honey, Serena's a troublemaker, plain and simple. When she turned sixteen, she went wild, practically became a slut. Her daddy could barely control her after her mamma died."

"What's that got to do with what Eric's done?"

"Well, she is the one who called Eric in the first place," Matt, argued.

"So are you saying she brought this on herself?" Cass asked.

David slammed his fist down on the steering wheel. "God, no, that's not what he's saying. Can we move past who's to blame for a moment, please? Do you think Calvin's right? Do you think Eric moved on after he saw Serena?"

"No," Cass snorted. "He most certainly did not move on. He wants revenge, David, plain and simple. I humiliated him, and that's not something he's gonna forgive. He doesn't give up until he gets what he wants." She turned around and smiled grimly at Matt. "Unfortunately, he wants my head on a platter."

"He's not getting anywhere near you, Cass." Matt turned his attention to David. "Turn the car around and get us home. I say we pack a few bags and take a little trip until things blow over."

“Absolutely not,” Cass cried. “He’s not gonna run me out of my own home again.” She glared at David and grabbed his arm when he began to turn the car around. “I mean it, David. I’m not going to leave town. I wanna get to the hospital to check on Serena.”

David ignored her and continued with his U-turn. “Calm down, honey. I’m gonna take us home for now, and we can visit Serena in the morning. Right now she’s being examined and made comfortable by the doctors, and you would just be in the way. Let her have tonight to settle in, and I promise I’ll take you to see her first thing in the morning.” He grinned over at her. “Hell, I’ll even buy you breakfast at the diner.”

Cass sat in silence for a moment. “All right, David. I’ll wait until the morning, but I’m still not taking a trip right now.”

Matt leaned forward and turned her face to his. “Then you have to agree to follow our rules, baby. We don’t want you out of our sight until after they catch him. One of us is with you at all times. You don’t leave that house without us. Do you understand?”

“Sounds like business as usual to me.” Cass giggled.

“He’s serious, Cass. Do you agree to our conditions?”

A feeling of calm flowed over Cass. “Yes, David, I agree. I’ve no wish to run into Eric without you guys there to protect me. I’ll be good. I promise.”

“Okay, then.” Matt sank back in the seat. “What’s for dinner tonight?”

* * * *

“You think this backwater town has a restaurant open on Sunday?” Marc stretched his legs out in the cramped front seat. “It’s lunchtime, man, and I’m starved.”

Tony chuckled. “You’re always hungry.”

“Give me a break, will ya? You gave me a damn Pop-Tart for breakfast. You didn’t think that would last me all day, did you?”

“Hardly.” Tony snorted. “I expected you to demand we stop several hours ago.”

“There, on the left on the next block.” Marc’s finger was practically pushing against the side of Tony’s nose.

“I see it. Keep your drawers on.”

“Too late, cowboy. I never put any on this morning.”

Tony groaned and glanced down at his lap. “Great, now I’ll have to eat breakfast sporting wood.”

“Get a load of the name on the place. It’ll take the starch right out of you.”

He pulled the car into the nearest parking spot and looked up. “Mamma’s Family Diner.” He sighed and looked down. “You’re right. Elvis has left the building.”

Laughing, Marc climbed out of the car and made his way toward the door. “Doesn’t look very busy.”

“Nah, it wouldn’t be yet. It’s only a little before noon and most folks haven’t gotten out of church yet.” He motioned Marc toward an empty booth and sat down. “After we eat I think our best bet is to contact this Cass Abernathy.”

“What about the woman John told me about?” He pulled out a small notebook from his pocket. “Serena Dammler.”

Tony shrugged. “She may be the one who contacted him, but ultimately his goal will be the ex-wife. I say we track her down and then give John a call in case he knows anything new.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Marc looked up and smiled at the waitress. “Well, hello there,” he glanced at her name tag, “Miss Callie.”

She grinned at him. “Hello to you, too, handsome. You fellows know what you want, or do you need a menu?”

“Give me three eggs over easy, double order of bacon, biscuits, and a cup of coffee, black.” Marc grinned at the flirty woman.

“I’ll take the same, only with one sugar in my coffee, and maybe some information.” Tony winked at the young woman.

“Information, huh? What is it you wanna know? I’ll tell you anything I can.” The look she gave them said that wasn’t all she’d give them if she got the chance.

Marc glanced at his notebook. “Can you tell us where we can find Carlisle Hardware and Oliver Barrett’s office?”

Callie’s eyes widened, and she pointed down the street. “They’re both down the road a few blocks right next to each other.” She gave them a cunning look. “You hear about the excitement down there?”

Marc looked at Tony briefly and then returned his attention to Callie. “What excitement, darlin’?”

Tony quickly scooted over when Callie sat down in the booth next to him. “I don’t know the whole story, but Serena got herself beaten up Friday night. Word is she tried to pull off something to get those Carlisle boys away from that older woman they’re seeing, and it backfired on her.” She lowered her voice. “Most people figure she finally got what she deserved.”

“She deserved to be beaten?” Marc asked, incredulous.

“Well,” she gave them a sly look, “she’s been playing men for fools since she hit puberty. There’s not a single man in town under the age of forty that she didn’t try and sink her claws into.”

“Was she badly hurt?” Marc couldn’t keep the anger out of his voice.

“Not really sure. I do know she’s still in the hospital.”

“Thanks,” Tony growled. “Do you think you could get our breakfast now? We’re in a bit of a hurry.”

Callie frowned, and got to her feet. “Sure thing. I’ll be right back.”

Tony watched her walk away and then glared at Marc. “I hate small town morality. We need to eat fast and get over to the hospital and check on that poor girl.”

“Yeah, I agree. We also need to check in with the local law enforcement and see what they’ve done about tracking Eric so far.

I'm gonna step outside and give John a call and see if he's heard about any of this."

"All right, just hurry up. I wanna get over to the hospital as soon as we can."

* * * *

"What room is Serena Dammler in?" Marc smiled at the elderly woman sitting at the information desk in the lobby of Pioneer Hospital. His fingers drummed impatiently on the counter while she pulled up the information on her computer.

"She's on the second floor, room two twenty-one." She pointed down the hall. "The elevators are down there on the left."

"Thank you," he mumbled and motioned for Tony to follow him. Silently, they entered the elevator and punched the button for the second floor. "After we talk to Ms. Dammler, we should drive by the sheriff's office. We don't wanna be busting heads with the local fuzz."

Tony grunted, but didn't say anything. The doors opened and together the two men walked over to the nurse's desk and looked around. Marc didn't see anybody at first, and then voices drifted out from a small room behind the desk.

"Dr. Farin's not happy about having her admitted to his service. I think he avoids making rounds on her whenever he can."

"Well, what do you expect?" The unknown female snorted. "It's hard to feel sorry for somebody that finally got what they deserved."

"You really believe Serena deserved to get beaten up? I went to school with her, and she's not so bad."

"That's your opinion, but I guarantee the rest of the women in this town don't feel the same. I still remember when Randy fell all over himself fixing her car last year. For free, no less. She came around the shop in her skimpy clothes, practically drooling all over him."

"Do you think he slept with her?"

“He always claimed I was imagining things, but I never really believed him. Hell, Joseph told us all about the things she was into.”

Marc had heard enough. “Excuse me,” he called out loudly. He waited for one of the women to stick her head out of the room.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t see you there.” An attractive blond woman dressed in pink scrubs walked over to the counter, followed closely by a brunette who could have passed for her twin. Both women were young and had badges on their uniforms identifying them as Evie and Alice.

Tony leaned close to Marc’s ear and whispered. “Stepford nurses.”

Camouflaging his snort with a cough, Marc pulled out his notebook and wrote down the names of the two nurses. “Which way is room two twenty-one?”

The women glanced briefly at each other and then the blonde spoke up, nodding toward the end of the hall. “It’s the next to the last room down there on the right.”

The brunette smirked. “Are you *friends* of the patient?”

The emphasis on the word friends wasn’t lost on Marc. He narrowed his eyes and put his notebook aside. “No, we’ve never met the lady. Let me ask you something, Alice. Have you and Evie ever heard of HIPPA laws?”

Alice hunched her shoulders and looked down at her feet. “Of course we have. Why do you ask?”

“Because you’ve violated patient confidentiality about a dozen times since we’ve been standing here.” Without another word, Marc walked away with Tony following close behind.

Just as they reached the end of the hall, the door to room two twenty-one opened, and a tall man wearing a law-enforcement uniform stepped out. His name plaque identified him as Sheriff Burtram. Marc stopped and eyed the man critically. “Sheriff Burtram, I’m Marc Weller, and this is my partner Tony Estabon. We were sent by the Houston PD to track and retrieve one Eric Abernathy. I

understand he had an altercation with one of your citizens Friday evening.”

Sheriff Burtram glanced from Marc to Tony and back again. “According to Serena’s statement, she practically invited him up here and then refused to give him the information he wanted when he showed up.” He chuckled. “Understandably, he was a mite pissed off after coming all this way.”

Marc gritted his teeth, struggling to control his temper. “Sheriff, you do realize that Eric Abernathy is a convicted felon now presently guilty of parole violation as well as wanted for a new list of charges?”

“Yeah, I know all about the boy’s background. His conviction was for malicious mischief. That hardly qualifies him for leg irons.”

“The man beat a woman severely enough for her to be hospitalized,” Tony said with a growl.

“Yes, I know the details. He had a little tiff with his wife, and he paid the ultimate price. Doesn’t make him a habitual criminal.”

“Except that now he’s gone and put another woman in the hospital. Most folks in law enforcement would call him a serial offender.” Marc couldn’t believe the attitude of the man.

“Well, son, let’s not forget that this little lady invited him to the party. She had an agenda all her own and tried to get him to do her dirty work for her. This time, things just happened to go wrong.”

“Sheriff, have you got your men out looking for Eric?” Marc asked.

“Yes, they’ve been given a description and told to keep their eyes open. But, I’ll tell you the same thing I told Cass. That boy’s long gone by now. He skedaddled out of there as soon as he heard my sirens, and he’s probably still running as fast as he can.” He crossed his arms across his chest. “Are you planning on going in to talk to Serena?”

“Yes, we need to get her statement before we do anything else. Unless there’s some reason you don’t want us talking to her.” Marc just wanted to wipe the smug smile off the asshole’s face.

“No, not at all. You go right ahead, but you best be careful. Serena will be all over you two like white on rice. She’s partial to young, handsome men.” Laughing, he walked away.

Tony sighed deeply. “Let’s get this over with so we can get the hell out of here.” He turned toward the door and started to push it open. Marc’s hand flew to his shoulder, stopping his forward movement as a loud male voice sounded from inside the room.

Chapter 3

“What the hell is wrong with you, girl?”

Serena winced at the shrill tone of her stepfather’s voice. She knew from experience nothing she could say would appease his anger. Raymond Edwards stood six feet tall with gray hair and brown eyes. Over sixty years old, he looked like a typical country farmer. Thin, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, he appeared to be an honest, Christian man. Looks could be very deceiving.

“Well, girl, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“It’s not her fault, Mr. Edwards.” Cass looked at Serena with pity in her eyes. “She’s a victim of Eric’s, the same as I was.”

“Mind your business, missy. You got no say in this.”

“You watch your tone, old man.” David took a step forward to put himself between Cass and the older man.

“I’ll not be taking any orders from the likes of you or your degenerate brother.”

Sighing, Serena tried to sit up against the headboard of her hospital bed. She looked around the room and wished for a miracle, one that would make her family disappear. She’d been happy when Cass, David and Matt had stopped by before breakfast. They’d made her feel special by coming to check on her. Then the sheriff had come in with her stepfather and stepbrothers, and everything had gone downhill. “It wasn’t as bad as the sheriff made it out to be.”

“Don’t hand me that. I know how you operate, little girl. You set out to cause mischief, and you got what was coming to you for your trouble.”

Serena glared at her stepbrother when he snickered. “Do we have to do this in front of Daniel and Joseph?” It was embarrassing enough to have Cass and the brothers witness his tirade.

“What difference does it make now, daughter? The whole town is talking about it today.”

Serena clenched her teeth as a shudder ran over her body. “I’m not your daughter.”

“And thankful I am for it.” Raymond growled. “Why do you have to be such a troublemaker, and so trashy? To think you would go to such lengths to align yourself with these sick bastards who shame a woman by sharing her.” He ignored the growls of the twin brothers and gave Cass a disgusted look before turning back to Serena. “You’re coming home with me, and you’ll do what I say from now on. No daughter of mine is gonna act the way you do. I’m gonna teach you some manners and decent behavior if it’s the last thing I do. It’s my constant shame everyone in this town knows of your whoring ways.”

“Mr. Edwards, Serena isn’t—” Cass tried to interrupt.

“Mind your own business, woman. Pray for you own soul while there’s still time.”

Serena cringed and then jumped when the hospital door flew open so hard it banged against the wall. Her mouth dropped open, and she gasped as two of the most handsome men she’d ever seen came storming into the room. Both men had to be nearly six feet tall, if not more. One of them had short brown hair and a sexy, five o’clock stubble on his face. The other had coal black hair that had been shaved so close to his head he almost appeared bald. They were dressed in jeans and T-shirts, so she didn’t think they were hospital personnel. She let her gaze wander up their muscular torsos, finally focusing on their eyes. Her first instinct had her moving farther toward the back side of the bed. She could see their nostrils flare as they stomped into the room.

“Who the hell are you?” Raymond asked.

"I'm Marc Weller, and this is my partner, Tony Estabon. We're from the Houston PD."

"You're here for Eric, aren't you?" Cass moved around David and offered her hand. "I'm Cass Abernathy." When David and Matt both growled, she laughed. "Soon to be Cass Carlisle."

Marc took her hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Abernathy." He watched as she repeated her handshake with his partner. "Yes, we've been sent to retrieve Mr. Abernathy and return him to Houston justice."

Cass turned around and pointed to the bed. "This is Serena Dammler, Eric's latest victim." She turned around and indicated the twin men standing at the foot of the bed. "These are my fiancés, David and Matt Carlisle."

Raymond chuckled. "Fiancés, that's rich. Another name for perverts in my book."

Cass sighed. "This charming man is Serena's father, Raymond Edwards."

"Stepfather," Serena said through gritted teeth.

* * * *

Marc studied the woman lying on the hospital bed and caught his breath. Something about her made him want to scoop her up and hide her away from all the pain in the world. She looked so fragile, radiating a lack of energy and a spirit devoid of hope. She didn't look like she weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. Her hair was long and blond but seemed lifeless. Her many bruises stood out obscenely against the stark, white hospital linen. The deep blue of her eyes drew him in, giving him a feeling of falling into a bottomless well. Unbelievable depth shone through along with a mountain of pain and disillusionment. He glanced over at Tony and found his lover just as entranced.

“Are you going to do something about protecting Cass and Serena until Eric is captured?” Matt stepped up closer and put his arm around Cass’s shoulders.

“That won’t be necessary.” Raymond spoke up. “Serena will be coming back home with us where I can make sure she won’t cause any more trouble.” He nodded toward the two young men standing behind him. “Daniel and Joseph have promised to help me watch after her.”

Marc saw a look of fear flash in Serena’s eyes while her entire body shuddered. He turned his attention to Raymond. “I don’t believe we were introduced to these young men.”

“These are Serena’s brothers, Daniel and Joseph.” Both men nodded but didn’t speak.

“Stepbrothers,” Serena cried out.

Marc made a split decision and hoped Tony wouldn’t give him away. “I’m sorry, Mr. Edwards, but that won’t be possible.”

“What’s not possible?” Raymond asked. He frowned and tilted his head to the side.

“We have to take Serena into protective custody.” He could feel Tony’s stare but refused to meet his eyes. “She’s a material witness in a heinous serial offender’s crime, and it’s imperative she remain protected to give her testimony when he’s apprehended.”

“Heinous crime,” Raymond bellowed. “She tricked the poor boy into coming up here and then backed out of their deal. He reacted the way any man would. Serena needs to come home so she can learn her place.”

Marc watched as the twin brothers took two steps toward the old man. “No matter what Ms. Dammler did or didn’t do, there’s no excuse for what Mr. Abernathy did. The fact that it’s not the first time he’s committed this particular offense is proof that the problem is his and no one else’s.”

Raymond laughed. “I know all about his first brush with the law.” He nodded toward Cass. “This here lady pushed his buttons too many

times, and he lost his temper. It's happened to the best of us. He paid his debt to society, and now he's out, and that should be the end of it. He'd never have even come here if it wasn't for Serena. That doesn't mean he's gonna stick around to cause her any harm. I imagine that young man's halfway to China by now wishing he'd never met either of these two women."

"Whether that's true or not, it doesn't matter. Our orders are to take Ms. Dammler into protective custody and put her in a safe place until such time as Eric Abernathy is behind bars again." He took a step closer to Serena's father and narrowed his eyes. "If you try and interfere, you'll be in violation of a court extradition order, and we'll take you into custody as well. You'll be charged with obstructing justice." Marc hoped no one in the room had enough legal knowledge to call him on his bluff.

Raymond stared at Marc for a moment, and then turned his eyes to the woman cowering on the bed. "Fine, you take her then. Where will she be staying?"

"Sorry, but that's classified. I can only assure you that she'll be in a safe location."

Raymond sighed. "All right, but you better be forewarned." He looked Marc up and down. "The two of you look like you're fairly well-off, probably make a good living, and I don't see any wedding rings. Serena is bound and determined to land herself a rich man, no matter what it takes. She'll take you for everything you have." His two sons laughed, but stifled it quickly when Raymond turned and glared at them before returning his attention to Marc. "You best be on the lookout for her trickery." He nodded toward Cass and her men. "She wanted to join up with these two in their perverted ways, but this little hussy beat her to it."

Marc could see the brothers were about to explode. Before he could say anything, he felt Tony's arm come around his waist.

“I don’t think we have anything to worry about, Mr. Edwards.” Tony snuggled his body close to Marc’s side and let his voice drop provocatively. “We don’t let women come between us.”

Marc had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at the look on the old man’s face. Tony must have reached the end of his limit for him to have outed them on purpose.

“You’re, uh, you’re queer?” Raymond could barely get the words out. He took a step back as if they might be contagious.

“We prefer gay, and we’re long-term partners,” Marc answered. He smiled as Cass let out the laugh she’d been obviously trying to hold in. Both Matt and David had hands in front of their mouths, probably hiding smiles. A quick glance at Serena caught her mouth dropped open, an incredulous look on her face.

“You fuck each other in the butt?” Raymond’s son, Daniel, looked fascinated.

Tony took a step closer. “That’s not all we do. Are you interested in learning more?” He gave the boy a come-hither look.

“He most certainly is not,” Raymond roared. He grabbed his sons by their arms and thrust them toward the door. “Damn bunch of sick perverts. Serena, you’re just where you deserve to be, girl. Your dear, sweet mother would turn over in her grave at what you’ve become. Don’t bother crawling back to me when this is over and you’re alone again.” Without another word he walked out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

There was silence for a moment, and then Cass spoke up. “Well, that was fun.”

Serena groaned. “Not!”

Cass gave the men a long look. “Are you really going to take her someplace safe?”

“Absolutely,” Marc replied. “We can take you to a safe location as well.”

David and Matt both put their arms around Cass. “That’s not necessary.” David smiled. “We’ve decided to get married right away,

and we're taking Cass on a long, extended honeymoon somewhere warm and sandy."

Marc watched Cass walk over to the bed and take Serena into her arms. "You don't worry about anything anymore." She pulled back to stare at Serena's face. "None of this was your fault, Serena. Eric would have found me anyway, especially with the newspaper making such a big deal of Oliver's arrest. I'm just sorry you had to get caught up in the middle of everything."

A lone tear ran down Serena's bruised face. "I'm so sorry, Cass. I wish there was something I could do to make everything up to you. I never meant for anybody to get hurt, not really. I was just so jealous."

"I know, sweetie. But I really think you're just jealous of me being in love. I don't think, deep down, you're in love with Matt and David." She leaned closer and wiped away the tear from her cheek. "I just want you to get some rest and heal. You do what these nice officers tell you to do, and you'll stay safe." She leaned a little closer. "You'll find the love you're looking for Serena. I know you will."

Cass motioned for Matt and David to follow her, and she walked toward the door. She stopped in front of Marc and looked at him for a long time. Suddenly, she smiled and patted him on the arm. "You take really good care of Serena. She really is a good person."

Marc watched as Cass and the brothers left, and then turned his attention to Serena. For a moment he watched her cry silently, the tears streaming down her swollen face. He looked at Tony. "Would you go and talk to the doctor and find out when we can get her out of here?" Tony looked like he wanted to say something, but only nodded and went to carry out Marc's request.

Slowly Marc approached the bed. "Everything's going to be all right, Ms. Dammler. We'll keep you safe."

She slowly raised her gaze to his. "I know you will. I'm not worried about that." She sighed. "My stepfather's right. I always hoped to have a rich husband some day." Her head lowered to rest against the pillow. "I wanted someone to take me away from this

miserable town.” She yanked the sheet up to her chin. “I don’t want any man now. I just wanna feel safe and get the hell out of Mountain Vista.”

Marc couldn’t resist brushing the hair off her face. “Don’t you worry none, darlin’. We’re gonna take you to a place nobody would ever think to look for you.”

“Yeah, where’s that?” Her voice began to sound drowsy.

He continued to brush his hand along the top of her head. “Shh, get some rest now. I’ll tell you everything when you wake.” As he watched, her eyes drifted shut. In just a very few minutes her breathing told him she’d dropped off into a healing sleep.

Marc couldn’t for the life of him figure out the strange, strong attraction to the injured woman. She was pretty, but not incredibly beautiful. He and Tony were totally committed to each other, but something told him this woman belonged with them. He looked up when the door opened, surprised to see the ominous look on Tony’s face. His partner motioned for him to come out into the hall. Looking back, he ran his knuckles gently down Serena’s bruised cheek, and then followed him out the door.

“What’s wrong?”

Tony narrowed his eyes, a tight expression on his face. “Couldn’t find her regular doctor, but I did get to talk to the one on call. He says she can leave here in the morning as long as there are no complications during the night.”

“Okay, that’s good news.” He took a step toward his partner and lowered his voice. “So, what’s got your boxers in a kink? Are you angry because of what I said to her father?”

Tony shook his head. “No. I was surprised at first, but not angry. What was that all about anyway?”

“Wish I could explain it, but I’m not entirely sure myself. I took one look at her and felt this tremendous urge to protect.” He looked at Tony sheepishly. “I want to take her back to the ranch.”

Tony whistled low. “Damn, you do have a case on her, don’t you?” He grinned. “She does kind of get under your skin, and I can’t quite figure out why. Hell, she’s too damn skinny, too pale, and pretty broken right now, but I bet she’s beautiful when she heals.”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

Tony snorted loudly. “I’m thinking if all the gossip about her is true we might be grabbing a tiger by the tail.”

“So we do something to protect ourselves. We’ve always talked about getting ourselves a third, and we already know she ain’t adverse to the idea.” Marc combed his fingers through his hair. “Hell, Tony, she makes me think of family, warm nights by the fire on the ranch, and skinny dipping in the pond.”

“Skinny dipping is right.” Tony laughed. “We’re gonna have to fatten that little filly up, or we’re liable to break her.”

“Does that mean you’re willing to take her back to the ranch?”

Tony’s face turned harsh. “This doc that’s covering for the regular one was a fountain of information.”

“Do say. Tell me more.”

“He’s happy that we’ve come to take her away. He said he can’t stand the way the staff and her family have been treating her.”

Marc sighed. “Well, we’ve seen some of that since we’ve been here. How the hell did you get him to tell you anything?”

“I don’t think they worry too much about confidentiality here. I just flashed my badge, and he opened right up. Doc said the old man blamed her for the whole episode and has shared his thoughts with anybody willing to stand still and listen.”

“Damn fool.”

“That ain’t the half of it. Doc wanted to give her something for the pain about an hour ago, and her old man told him not to bother. Said she ought to have to suffer some for what she’d done.”

“What!”

“Yeah, but he said he gave her the pain shot anyway. He debated on having her family tossed out, but the hospital’s legal advisor said

he couldn't do it. The patient could have requested it since she's conscious, but the hospital had no authority unless they became unruly."

"Son of a bitch!"

"So, what were you doing telling the family we're here to place her in protective custody?"

Marc grimaced. "It was the first thing that popped into my head. She looked so defenseless in that big bed while that asshole berated her. I just wanted to knock him down a peg or two." He looked at Tony imploringly. "There's something about her, Tony. I can't explain it, but I have to know where it'll lead."

Tony stayed quiet for a minute and then nodded. "Yeah, there's something special about her. There's no doubt about that. You do realize that I just gave her the impression we're gay, right?"

Marc laughed. "Yeah, it was the highlight of our meeting. I'll never forget the look on the old man's face."

"Yeah? What about that boy of his when I offered to show him more?"

"Priceless, man. Priceless."

"So now what?"

Marc took a sobering breath and thought for a minute. "Now we take her home to the ranch, but we don't tell her it's our ranch."

"Huh?"

"No reason to let her know how well-off we are. We can let her think we work on the ranch."

"How the hell are we supposed to do that?"

"We'll give Jeremy a call." Jeremy Collier had been their ranch foreman since they purchased the place five years ago. "He can get the line cabin ready for us. You know, air it out and stock it with groceries. We'll take her there and let her think we're hands on the spread." The small cabin sat a pretty good distance from the main ranch house. The hands used it for shelter when it was too far to go

back and forth during branding or fence mending. “We’ll just make sure Jeremy lets everyone know it’s off-limits until further notice.”

“You want her to rough it out in the cabin?”

“Hell, it’s not that rough. It has a kitchen and everything.”

“Not gonna be much privacy with just the two small bedrooms.”

Marc grinned. “That’s what I’m counting on.”

“Doesn’t bother you that she’ll hear us in the bedroom?”

“No, if she’s the right one for us, she’ll have to get used to hearing and seeing us together. It’ll be a good test.”

Tony smiled and turned to walk away

“Hey, where you going?”

“Can’t use my cell phone in the hospital. I’m going outside to call Jeremy and set things up.”

Marc grinned and went back into Serena’s room. He took a seat near the window and stared intently at the sleeping beauty. An excitement ran through him he hadn’t felt in a really long time. The last few years had been good. He and Tony had established a home and started a whole new life. But there had always been something missing, and now he had a pretty good idea what that something was. A skinny little blond with pretty blue eyes would round out their family quite nicely. He didn’t have a clue what to do when they got back to Texas, but he couldn’t wait to get the little darlin’ home.

* * * *

Eric Abernathy paced slowly back and forth across the narrow motel room while he waited for his brother to answer the phone. He’d driven until exhaustion forced him to find a cheap place to spend the night.

“Yeah?”

“Kev, it’s me. I need your help?”

“Where the hell are you, Eric. The damn phone shows unknown name and number.”

“Somewhere in California, but to be honest I don’t have any idea where. I got so tired last night I had to stop and get some sleep or risk wrecking the car.”

“Shit, don’t do that. I didn’t take the extra insurance out when I rented it for you.”

Eric laughed. “Always thinking of yourself, bro.”

“Fuck you, asshole. What do you want anyway? You woke me up.”

“I’m in trouble, and I need your help.”

“You gotta be kidding me. You let Cass stick it to you again?”

“Hell no, I never even got to see Cass. That damn bitch that called you got cold feet. She wouldn’t even tell me where to find Cass.”

“So what did you do?”

“Tried to make her talk, but I didn’t have enough time. We were at that lawyer’s office that she works for, and some woman came in and caught me.”

“Caught you doing what?”

“Teaching her who’s boss. She needed a little persuasion to loosen up that tongue.”

“So, what happened when you got caught?”

Eric sighed. “I guess she called the police. It’s a small town, and it wasn’t long after she ran off that I heard sirens. I didn’t take any chances and got out of there as quick as I could.”

“What did you leave behind?”

“Nothing too serious. She’ll probably want to see a doctor, but the bitch was still breathing.”

“I guess that’s something. So, what do you need from me?”

“Money and information.”

“How much and what?”

“Put about five hundred into the checking account so I can use an ATM. I’m beginning to run low.”

“Fool, don’t you know they’ll trace the ATM withdrawal?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know they would if they could. Nobody knows about the account you set up for me. Besides, I’m not stupid. I’m not gonna stick around and wait on ’em. I’ll take out the money then hightail it out of here. I plan on heading home, but with a roundabout route.”

“They’ll probably be waiting on you when you get home. That parole officer of yours sent some fellow by day before yesterday to find out when we talked to you last.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That you’d been by that morning, and you were out looking for a new job. I let him think you weren’t happy at Omnipress.”

“You think he bought it?”

“He seemed to. I really didn’t give him much time to react. I left pretty quick to get to a job site.”

“They’re gonna wonder where I’ve been all this time. They’ve probably already checked the apartment.”

“I doubt your landlord is gonna be willing to cover for your sorry ass.”

“That’s for sure. Can you make Roberta say I’ve been staying there for this last week?”

“No problem. She’ll say whatever I tell her to. But what about that Oregon bitch? She’ll tell the cops it was you.

“Nah, she won’t talk. She’ll be too afraid I’ll come back and finish it.”

“When will you be back?”

“If you get the money transferred this morning so I can draw it out this afternoon, I’ll be back sometime late tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’ll get dressed and be there when the bank opens. It shouldn’t be a problem for you to draw some out since I’ll just be transferring the cash from one account to the other.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“You owe me a hell of a lot more than one.”

“Yeah, yeah, I owe you a lot. You’ve always been there for me, bro, through thick and thin.”

“We Abernathy men gotta stick together. It’s us against the world.”

“All right, enough mushy crap. Get your butt up and get to the bank.”

“I’m up. Give it till about ten o’clock and then give it a try.”

“All right, thanks, bro. If all goes well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, come by here first, and I’ll follow you to take the rental car back.”

“Sounds good. Talk to you later.”

“All right, bye.”

Sighing, Eric looked at his watch. He had to kill two hours before he could try and get some cash. He walked over and stared out the window. He hadn’t seen anything even resembling a bank, but there had been a full-service gas station down the road from the motel. Maybe they would have an ATM machine.

He grabbed up his keys and walked out of the motel. He pressed the button on the key ring and heard the click of the locks opening on the car doors.

“Eric Abernathy?”

Eric swung around in alarm, taking in the sight of the middle-aged man with a rounded belly dressed in a policeman’s uniform. “I’m sorry. You’ve got the wrong person.”

The officer laughed. “Give it a rest, son.” He took a hold of Eric’s arm in a surprisingly strong grip and slapped a handcuff on his wrist. He quickly spun him around securing both wrists in the cuffs behind his back. “You have the right to remain silent.”

“You’re making a mistake. I’m not who you think I am,” Eric pleaded.

The officer pulled a folded sheet of paper from him pocket. He opened it and showed it to Eric. It was a copy of his mug shot that looked like it came from a fax machine. “No mistake, boy. You’re

Eric Abernathy. You're wanted for parole violations and suspicion of assault and battery."

Eric sighed. "How the hell did you find me?"

The officer chuckled. "Afraid I can't take credit for that. The call I got said they traced you through this rental car. It's got a GPS locator in it. Once they knew you had a rental car, it was easy to pinpoint your exact location." He pulled Eric toward a police cruiser parked at the far end of the motel. "Sorry, son, but you're heading back to Texas as soon as they send somebody to pick you up.

Chapter 4

“Rena, wake up.”

Serena gradually became aware of a hand gently shaking her shoulder. She raised her head and glanced out the window. They had stopped in front of a line of stores in what looked like a really small town. Feeling grumpy, she looked into the brown eyes of the man leaning over the seat. “My name isn’t Rena.”

Marc chuckled, and tweaked her nose. “Come on, sunshine, let’s get some food in you and see if your mood improves.”

She glanced toward the front seat where Tony watched their exchange. “Where are we?”

Tony smiled. “We’re in Kaufman.”

She rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t really tell me much, cowboy.”

He laughed. “Kaufman’s in Texas, princess. We’re about an hour away from the ranch.”

“An hour?” She frowned. “Then why are we stopping?”

Marc tugged steadily on her arm. “Because we’re starving. When we get to the ranch we’ll have to unload your stuff, get you settled and check the stock. It’ll be hours before we have time to cook.”

“All right, all right. Hold your horses.” She carefully slid out of the backseat, using Marc’s arm for support. She didn’t have any broken bones, but her body was one massive bruise. Any movement at all caused quite a bit of pain. A deep sigh of relief escaped when she finally reached the sidewalk. Slowly she looked around. “Western Wear, Feed & Seed, Post Office. There’s not much here, is there?”

“It’s just a small town, princess. The ranchers use it for their more pressing needs. Hell, it only covers about six or seven square miles.

Nearest big town is Grays Prairie, but it's a couple of hours away." Tony held the door open while Marc guided her into the diner.

"Stop calling me all those ridiculous, cutesy names. My name is Serena."

"Well, would you look what the cat drug in?"

Tony smiled and gave the woman in an oversized apron a bear hug, lifting her clear off her feet. She was tall, nearly six feet, with short brown hair and a wide, beaming smile. "Howdy, Miss Millie. How are you doing this beautiful, sunny day?"

Millie squealed and smacked his shoulders. "Put me down, you silly ruffian. I heard you two were away on a job."

Tony laughed and lowered her back to the floor. "We were, but we're home now."

Millie glanced over at Marc. "And I see you've brought a friend. Want to introduce me to the lovely lady?" She walked over to stand in front of Marc and looked at Serena. "Oh my goodness, child. What on earth happened to you?"

Marc took Millie's hand and kissed her knuckles. "She had a run-in with a bad sort, and we brought her home to keep her safe and let her heal. Millie, this is Rena. Rena, this is Millie Carver. She owns this place and makes the best chicken and dumplings in the world."

"Oh, you scamp." She held her hand out to Serena. "I'm pleased to meet you, young lady. You're in good hands with these two. You won't find any more honorable men. They'll keep you safe and out of trouble."

Serena took the woman's hand. "Thanks, Millie. It's a pleasure to be here." She glared briefly at Marc. "But my name is Serena, not Rena."

"Serena it is then." Millie smiled and pointed toward a table by the window. "Why don't you guys get comfortable, and I'll get some waters while you look at the menu."

“Come on, sunshine, let’s get you settled.” Marc led Serena over to the table and held her chair. He sat down next to her while Tony took the seat across from them.

“So, how about telling me about this ranch you’re taking me to?”

Tony frowned. “We told you all about it day before yesterday.”

“Yes, but I was heavily under the influence of those pretty little white pills Dr. Farin gave me for pain. I haven’t had any of them since last night, so I’m pretty sure I’ll remember what you tell me this time.”

“Okay, what do you want to know?” Tony smiled up at Millie when she brought the waters and placed them on the table.

“You guys know what you want, or do you need a minute?” Millie pulled out a little pad from her pocket and looked at them expectantly.

Serena didn’t wait for the men to speak. “I’d like to try the chicken and dumplings they’ve been bragging about.”

Millie beamed. “Really? What about you boys?”

Marc handed her the menus. “Make it dumplings all around, Millie. And bring us some of them biscuits you make.” He looked over at Serena. “This here woman needs some fattening up.”

Serena scowled. They’d been trying to force her to eat more for the last two days, and it was beginning to wear on her nerves. “The last thing I need to be is fat.”

“I’ll get your lunch together and have it right out.” Millie walked quickly toward the back of the diner.

Serena watched her walk away and turned her attention back to Tony. “What’s the name of the ranch where you work?”

Tony glanced at Marc before answering. “It’s called End of the Road Haven.”

“How big is it?”

“Only about eight hundred acres, but it’s prime land with its own water sources.” Marc offered Serena the basket of biscuits Millie had just placed on the table and frowned when she shook her head. “Thanks, Mille.”

“You said it’s a cattle ranch. Is that right?”

“Yeah, we raise Texas longhorns.” Tony grabbed a biscuit for himself.

“What’s so special about longhorns?”

“Ours are beef cows. Longhorns are known for being lean beef. They’re low in fat, cholesterol and calories. Makes them in high demand.” He glanced up. “Tony, hand me the butter.”

“What do you do on the ranch? Are you just workers, or are you, like, bosses?”

Marc choked on the biscuit he crammed in his mouth and Serena turned and pounded on his back. “I’m okay, now. It just went down the wrong way.” He took a drink of his water. “We’re what you call hands. The foreman’s name is Jeremy Collier. He’s been there for a lot of years. You’ll get to meet him sooner or later.”

“I heard his daughter is spending the summer with him on the ranch.” Tony smiled at Serena. “She’s a little darlin’. I think Kaylee’s around thirteen or fourteen years old now, and she can ride as well as any man on the place.”

“If she’s only there for the summer, where does she usually live?”

“She and her mom live in Denver. I think her parents divorced when she was just a little baby. She spends almost every summer on the ranch.”

“Where will I be staying?”

Marc put his arm around her shoulders. “We’ve got a small cabin a little ways off from the main ranch house. You’ll stay there with us.”

“A cabin? You mean like camping out in a cabin?”

Tony chuckled, and then covered his mouth with his hand when Serena shot him a glare. “No, it’s definitely not like camping. It has two bedrooms with a kitchen and living room combination with a fireplace.” He grinned wickedly. “There’s even indoor plumbing and electricity for you, city girl!”

“Ha ha, very funny. What am I supposed to do all day while you’re out on the range with your little doggies? Watch television and do my nails?”

Tony grimaced and shot Marc a look she couldn’t decipher. “That would be extremely difficult since we don’t own a television.”

“What? You’re kidding, right?”

“Sorry, I’m not kidding. We do have a pretty extensive library of paperbacks.”

“And you can always ride with us every day and see some of the countryside. It’s beautiful.” Marc took her hand. “Have you ever been on a horse?”

“Uh, sure. When I was little, my mother would put quarters in the one in front of the grocery and let it shake me back and forth for about three minutes.”

Tony stifled a laugh. “Well, we can definitely do better than that. I’ll put you on one that doesn’t require money to make it go.”

Serena shook her head and concentrated on eating a little of her lunch. She could barely contain her groan when she tasted the first bite. She’d been watching her weight for years and never allowed herself to indulge in things this fattening. She looked up at Tony. “How did the two of you end up working for the police?”

“We don’t actually work for the police,” Tony replied.

“But you said the Houston PD sent you.”

“They did, but we don’t really work for them. We’re bounty hunters.”

Serena’s fork stopped halfway to her mouth. “Bounty hunters, really? That sounds so cool.”

“Well, don’t get too excited,” Marc said. “We only take jobs every once in a while for a little extra money or to do a friend a favor.”

She thought for a moment. “Am I extra money or a favor?”

“Definitely a favor, sunshine.” Marc raised her hand to his mouth and pressed a light kiss on her palm. “Definitely a favor.”

“Is everything all right?” Millie leaned against the back of Tony’s chair. “Can I get anyone a piece of cobbler?”

Serena groaned. “It was delicious; Millie, but I couldn’t hold another bite.”

“Why, child, you hardly ate a thing.” Millie frowned. “Tell you what. I’ll pack this up to go and throw in some cobbler for you guys to enjoy later.”

“Thanks, Mille, that would be great. Just put this on our tab, okay?”

“Sure thing, Marc. Anything for you boys.” She reached for Serena’s plate. “I’ll have this boxed up in no time.”

“If you gentlemen will excuse me, I’d like to hit the little girl’s room before we start out.”

As she pushed to her feet, Marc rose and pulled the chair out of her way. “Will you be okay by yourself?”

Serena laughed. “Yes, Marc, I’ve been going to potty by myself for quite a few years. I’ll be fine.”

“Smart ass,” he grumbled as she walked away.

Serena took care of her business in the washroom and then stood in front of the mirror to wash her hands. Her face had gradually turned purple, blue and yellow over the last two days. Thankfully, she’d been able to open her eye and see clearly this morning. Two days of being on the road with these guys had severely tested her reserves. They produced feelings in Serena she’d never experienced. Frustration seemed too mild a word to describe how she felt.

“Why the hell do they have to be gay?” She looked around guiltily to make sure no one was around to hear. She shook her head. She didn’t want to stay on some remote cattle ranch with the two men. It made her uncomfortable seeing the way they stared at one another. She’d give anything to have someone look at her that way. She blinked back fresh tears. “They feel sorry for me.” The hugs, the hand holding and kissing were all signs of their pity, and that’s something

she didn't want. Sighing, she stared into the mirror. "I just hope they catch Eric quickly so I can get the hell out of Texas."

* * * *

"You don't think she's in there throwing up, do you?" Marc stared anxiously toward the door to the women's bathroom.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"When I put my arm around her, I can count every rib she has. She doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive. Maybe she's one of those people who throw up after they eat so they can stay skinny."

Tony rubbed his hand wearily over his eyes. "You mean bulimic?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"No, I don't think she's got any kind of eating disorder. She's just skinny. The doc would have warned us if there was something we needed to be watching out for." He finished off his glass of tea. "How long do you think we can keep her from finding out Abernathy's in custody?"

"I don't see how she could find out. Nobody at the ranch even knows why she's here."

"Don't you think she's gonna be a mite pissed when she finds out we lied to her?"

"Come on, Tony. I just want some time to get to know her better, and for her to get to know us. I think something's there, something worth fighting for, but we have to give it a chance."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I look at her and get this insane urge to wrap myself around her. It's not just for protection either. She makes my dick so damn hard I'm afraid it'll break off. I've been having fantasies about sinking deep into her pussy while she's got you sucked between them peach colored lips of hers."

“Damn, do you have to be so graphic?” Marc reached down and adjusted himself inside his jeans. “Now I’m gonna be stuck riding back to the ranch with the hard-on from hell.”

Tony chuckled. “Well, I could always...”

“You guys ready to get out of here?”

Tony grinned. “Let’s go, princess.”

“My name is Serena,” she grumbled and then headed for the door.

* * * *

“You’ll get your first view of the ranch over this next hill.” Marc turned around in his seat and pointed toward the driver’s window. They’d given her the back seat for most of the trip so she could lie down whenever she needed. Tony had done most of the driving.

“There she is,” Tony said.

Serena leaned forward and peered out the window. Her gaze went to the elegant, sprawling house surrounded by a white fence that looked to be wooden. There was a huge front porch that wrapped around to the side. She could see several rocking chairs and a couple of small tables. “Is that the owner’s house?”

“Uh, yeah, the owner lives there, but he’s not around much.” Tony cleared his throat and nodded his head. “That’s the main barn. The pens around it are used for the few horses that are kept here.” He pointed in the opposite direction. “That building is used to house both permanent and temporary hands, and the little house behind it belongs to the ranch foreman.”

“I thought you said you had a small cabin all to yourselves.”

“We do,” Marc assured her. “We’ve been here a long time and kind of have special privileges.”

The car pulled up and stopped in front of the barn. Serena watched as a tall, muscular man dressed in jeans, a faded T-shirt and cowboy hat came strolling toward the car. His demeanor screamed cowboy.

“Hey, Jeremy,” Tony called out. “Everything going okay? Did you get the cabin checked out?”

“Sure thing, Tony. Welcome home.” He bent down and glanced into the car. “Hey, Marc. I got everything ready out at the cabin for you just like you wanted.” He glanced at Serena.

“Sorry, Jeremy, this is Rena Dammler. She’ll be our guest for a while. Rena, this is the foreman of End of the Road Haven, Jeremy Collier.” Marc gave Jeremy a look that Serena thought odd.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Collier.” She decided it was more trouble that it was worth to keep correcting her name. It wasn’t as if she planned on sticking around for any length of time.

“Pleasure’s mine, but please call me Jeremy.”

“Then you have to call me”—she glanced at Marc—“Rena.” She ignored the delighted looks on Tony and Marc’s faces.

Jeremy turned his attention back to Tony. “I took the horses you asked for up myself this morning. Mucked out the stalls and laid in fresh hay. I also filled the grain bins and the water troughs, so you should be set for a few days at least.”

“Where are the longhorns I keep hearing about? I don’t see any cows anywhere.”

Jeremy grinned. “They’re out grazing on the spread, Rena. You’ll have to get the guys to take you riding so you can see the herd.”

“Maybe later.” Tony frowned. “Right now we’d like to get Rena up to the cabin and get her settled. She’s recovering, and I think the drive was a little rough on her.”

Jeremy scowled, and stared intently at her face. “Hope you gave as good as you got.” He pulled off his hat and wiped his forehead with a bandana he pulled from his pocket. “The ride to the cabin’s gonna be rough. We had some storms since you’ve been away, and the potholes are pretty bad. Better take it slow.”

“We will. Is that daughter of yours here yet?” Tony started the engine.

“Yeah, she got in this morning. She must’ve grown a foot since the last time I saw her. She’s out riding the fence line with Kyle and Warren.”

Marc laughed. “You tell her I said she better save some time for her honorary uncles while she’s here.”

“Will do, boss, err uh, guys. I’ll see ya’ll later.” He waved as Tony drove away.

For the next half hour Serena felt like screaming. Every bump in the road sent agonizing pain through her bruised ribcage. She stifled a snort. *Road* was a funny term for what they were traveling on. It would be more accurate to say *trail* since it was mostly dirt and rock with some interesting patterns of holes thrown in to make travel interesting. The men kept apologizing, but there wasn’t anything they could really do. Finally the car slowed, and a small cabin came into view.

“Here we are, sunshine, home sweet home, at least for the time being.” Marc opened his door as soon as Tony stopped the car. Quickly he came to help Serena out of the backseat. “Careful, just slide over gently. Just a few more minutes and you can lie back on a comfortable mattress and take one of those little white pills. Hell, you can take two after the day you’ve had.”

Serena let Marc pull her from the car and took a long look around. The cabin was small, but charming in a rustic way. It was made of logs in just a simple A-design. It had two windows on the front and one on the side that she could see. The front door appeared to be solid wood, and it had only a step for a front porch. A chimney stood out against a blue, cloudless sky.

“What’s that over there?” Serena asked.

“That’s the barn where we house our horses when we’re here. After you rest up I’ll take you to meet them if you like.” Marc began leading her toward the cabin.

“Right now all I can think of is lying down on something that isn’t moving.” Both men laughed at her words. Serena let them help her

into the cabin. She walked to the center of the room and tried to take everything in. It was a huge living area that included a kitchen on one side, and a fireplace, sofa and full size bed on the other. Two closed doors on the far wall completed the room. The sight of the bed caused her to take a step back. "I thought you said this place had two bedrooms."

"It does," Tony replied. He walked over to one of the doors and opened it. He motioned for her to come and look inside. "This is the second bedroom, the one we're going to put you in."

Serena looked into the opened doorway. As far as bedrooms went, it was pretty simple. It had a large bed, a chest of drawers and one upholstered chair. On top of the chest were several stacks of paperback books. The room had one window with a white pull down shade. Serena walked further in and frowned. "Where's the bathroom?"

"It's out here." Marc stepped over to the other closed door and opened it.

Serena sighed. "It doesn't make sense for me to take this room. You guys need the privacy, not to mention the bigger bed, more than I do." She walked back out into the larger room. "I'll be fine on the bed in here."

"No, that won't work." Tony growled. "You're gonna need a lot of rest over the next few days, and if you're out here, we'll have to be extra quiet coming and going. It's better for us if you take the smaller room."

Serena frowned, and then sighed. "Okay, I can see it would be easier if I'm out of the way." She walked slowly back into the room. "If it's okay with you guys, I'd like to lie down for a while."

"That's the plan, sunshine." Marc took her arm and helped her over to the bed. She sat gingerly on the edge, and he bent and took off her shoes and then lifted her legs onto the mattress. "Up you go."

"Thanks, Marc."

Tony came walking in with a glass of water and a pill bottle in his hand. He handed her the water and shook two pills from the bottle. "Here ya go. It's time to take away all the aches and pains."

"If I take two it'll knock me out," she complained.

"Yep, that's the idea." Tony held the pills out and waited for her to take them from his hand.

Serena swallowed both of them and then lay back against the pillows groaning in delight at the softness of the mattress. She smiled when Marc pulled up the blanket that had been folded across the foot of the bed.

"You'll be perfectly safe here, Rena. We'll be just outside in the barn for a while checking on the animals. If you need us, just call out and we'll come running." Tony hesitated for just a moment and then leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Sleep tight, princess." Marc repeated the caress on her cheek from the other side of the bed and then both men walked out of the room leaving the door open.

"What in the world is going on?" Serena whispered. Exhausted from the long ride, it was only moments before she gave up trying to figure out the men and allowed sleep to overtake her.

* * * *

Tony led the way out to the barn. He'd no sooner cleared the door before a pair of arms surrounded him from behind. He felt Marc's lips against the skin of his neck, and his cock went from semi-soft to hard as steel in the blink of an eye. It felt as if every drop of blood in his body pooled in his aching balls. Slowly he turned in the circle of Marc's arms and rubbed his cock against the bulge in his lover's jeans. He cupped the back of his head, tangling his fingers in his hair and pressed their mouths together. His tongue teased, licking and stroking.

Marc took the kiss deeper, his tongue sweeping through Tony's mouth, and then groaned loudly when he wrapped his lips around it and sucked hard. His fingers stroked briefly across Tony's short hair then trailed down his body undoing the buttons of his shirt. When it gaped open, he leaned forward and licked the small brown nipple, sucking it in between his lips.

Tony pushed Marc back and yanked the other man's T-shirt over his head. Draping his long muscular arm around his waist, he pulled their bodies together. His hand snaked down his taut abdomen, dipping into the waistband of his jeans. He let his fingers slip inside his underwear and brush the head of his cock.

"Want you inside me," Marc gasped.

Tony popped the button and eased the zipper down on Marc's denim jeans. "Be patient. There's no hurry. Rena won't wake for hours." Slowly he pushed the jeans and shorts down to his hips and watched Marc's cock spring forward.

"Suck me, please," Marc begged.

Tony's fingers tightened on Marc's hips and drew him closer. He slid down his body, lips and tongue caressing his chest and stomach until he could bury his nose in the bushy pubic hair. Inhaling deeply, he took in his lover's scent. He let his long fingers slide around him, exploring his cock, squeezing and caressing. "God, I've missed this smell."

Marc's fingers tightened on his shoulders. "Take me in your mouth, Tony. Don't make me wait. It's been too long."

Tony traced the slit of Marc's cock with his tongue, pressing in just a bit to lick up any drops of pre-cum. Marc moaned and pressed his groin closer to Tony's face. Pleased with his lover's reaction, Tony cupped his heavy balls, rolling them gently in his palms before running his tongue over their wrinkled surface. He scraped his teeth lightly along the shaft before placing a sucking kiss just to the head, nibbling lightly on the foreskin. Opening his lips wide, he took Marc's shaft deep into his mouth and let it hit the back of his throat.

As he sucked, Marc thrust his hips forward, forcing himself in a little further.

“Yes,” Marc hissed. “Take all of me, cowboy. Suck me dry.”

Letting Marc slip free, Tony licked lower, pressing his tongue just behind his balls to the small bit of flesh between them and his ass. He delighted at the harsh sound that erupted when he took his fingers and spread Marc open.

“Fuck me, Tony. Fuck me now.”

Grinning, Tony traced the little ring of muscles, his fingertips drawing a lazy circle. “Patience, lover, patience.”

“Patience, hell,” Marc cried. He tried to pull away, but Tony’s hands tightened on his hips, holding him firmly.

“Hold on, I’ll take care of you.” Tony stood, pulled off his shirt and laid it on the straw-covered ground. “Get on your hands and knees,” he said hoarsely. He watched while Marc toed off his shoes and then slid his jeans and underwear off onto the floor.

“Hurry up,” Marc cried.

Tony felt a rush of emotion overwhelm him as he watched his lover present his ass for his pleasure. He pulled the small package of lube that he always carried out of his pocket and quickly stripped off his clothes. Kneeling, he used his thumbs to part the firm ass cheeks in his hands and lowered his head. Slowly he licked a straight line up the crease, letting it slide teasingly over the puckered opening.

Marc yelped, his body trembling. “Are you trying to kill me?” He asked breathlessly.

Chuckling, Tony squirted the lube on his fingers and pushed one deep inside Marc’s body. In and out the finger slid, soon joined by a second. A long, low moan echoed as a third finger stretched him, nailing his prostate gland over and over.

“If you don’t hurry up, I’m gonna come before you even get in.” Marc could barely get the words out.

Tony slapped his ass hard, and then covered his throbbing erection with lubrication. “You better not come until I say you can.” He

grabbed hold of his cock and pressed it against Marc's hole, slowly pushing down and piercing his body in one slow slide. "I'm gonna bury my cock so deep inside you, you'll think it's part of you."

"Yeah, that's it. God, you feel so good, so damn good."

Tony reached around and wrapped his fingers around Marc's shaft as he began to thrust his hips back and forth. "So tight, so hot." He mumbled little words to let his lover know how good he made him feel. He began rocking his hips, Marc's cock sliding in and out of his fist.

"Harder," Marc cried.

Tony gripped Marc's hip with one hand and thrust into him again and again, harder and harder, his balls slapping into his ass. "Come for me, lover," he whispered, his hand stroking firmly up and down Marc's cock.

A thunderous roar exploded from Marc, and he became rigid as he came long and hard, spewing long, milky white ropes from his body. Tony gave several more quick thrusts and felt his balls tighten. A hoarse yell burst from his throat as he came, his entire body jerking and rocking. For several long moments, the lovers held their positions, and then exhaustion won out and they collapsed down onto the hay side-by-side.

"I don't ever want to lose you, Marc." Tony tried to keep the tremor from his voice but didn't think he'd succeeded.

Marc's arms tightened around his partner's warm, sweaty body. "Why would you say that? You're not gonna lose me. I'm in this for life, babe."

Tony sighed. "Things will be different if we bring Rena into our relationship."

"Hey." Marc pulled his face around to look into Tony's eyes. "Bringing her in is adding to the relationship, not taking away. But if you're against it, then we won't do it. Plain and simple."

"Just like that, you'd give her up for me?"

“I won’t do anything to jeopardize what we have together. You’ve been my rock, the center of my heart and my world, for a long time, and that’s not about to change.” He looked over toward the horses. “I can’t lie and say I don’t want her because I do. I thought she’d be a good addition for us, someone to round out our family. Kind of like having the best of both worlds.”

Tony laughed. “Any ideas how we’re supposed to convince the little city gal that we’d be good for her? Hell, how are you gonna let her know we’re not totally gay?”

“Easy. We’re gonna seduce her.”

Chapter 5

Serena jerked awake at the first bite of the belt across her legs. “No, get away from me,” she screamed. Terrified, she looked up into the furious face of her stepfather.

“Don’t you sass me, girl. I heard all about what you’ve been doing when I went to the bank yesterday. Davis’s son told him all about what you let him do.” He slammed the belt across the back of her legs as she tried to scurry off the other side of the bed.

“He’s lying. I’ve never even been on a date with him.” Serena dropped to the floor behind the bed and held up her arm to protect her head.

“You’re the one that’s lying. He’s not the first boy I’ve heard the story from.” He walked to the foot of the bed and allowed his belt to lash out across her shoulders. The thin strap of leather left behind a bright-red, raised welt. “I’m gonna teach you a lesson if it’s the last thing I do. You’ll not shame your blessed mother this way.”

“No, get out. This is my room. You’ve got no right to come in here without my permission. Stop, get out. Please stop,” she begged.

“Rena, wake up. It’s just a bad dream, sunshine. Wake up now.”

Serena opened her eyes and drew back in fear at the large, shadowy figure bending over her bed. “No, get away,” she cried. She tried to push herself away and then stopped when she felt the sharp, aching pain in her side.

“Rena, it’s me. It’s Marc, honey.” The overhead light came on and Marc’s face came into focus.

“Is she all right?” Tony’s concerned voice came from the bedroom doorway.

Marc slowly lowered his hand and brushed the hair off Serena's face. "She's fine, now. She was just having a bad dream."

Serena looked up and cringed. "I'm sorry if I woke you. Was I yelling?" *How much did they hear?*

Marc sat on the bed beside her and carefully drew her into his arms. "You didn't wake us. We've been up for about an hour. Just long enough to have our showers."

Embarrassment flooded her senses when she realized she'd curled up against a damp, bare chest. Glancing toward the window she could see daylight peeping around the edges of the pulled shade. "What time is it?" she whispered.

"A little after six." Tony took two steps into the room. "You've been asleep about sixteen hours. How're you feeling?"

Serena tried to gather her thoughts, but it wasn't easy curled up to a half-naked man. "A little stiff, I think, but other than that okay." Her stomach chose that moment to growl loudly.

Marc chuckled and hugged her tighter. "A little hungry, too, it sounds like. How about some breakfast, sunshine?"

"Rena, can you cook?" Tony asked.

Serena tried to pull back from Marc's hard, muscled chest and the clean, masculine scent filling her senses. "Uh, I..."

"That's okay, princess. I didn't really expect you to. Marc and I got no problem doing all the domestic stuff. We just want you to rest and get better. I'm no gourmet, but I can dish out some fine eggs and bacon. How do you like your eggs?"

Serena couldn't answer him for a moment as anger coursed through her. Then, the anger faded into hurt. Everyone always judged her, never taking the time to find out the truth. "Scrambled would be great, thanks."

"You bet. I'll get things started." He turned and headed for their kitchen area.

"A good, hot shower would probably take away a lot of the kinks. I think you've got time before breakfast will be ready."

Serena looked up into his dark brown eyes and pushed against his chest. “Yeah, that sounds pretty good.” She tried to scoot toward the edge of the bed. The feel of Marc’s hand on her thigh made her stop.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Serena looked at him in confusion.

“Your nightmare.”

She took a shaky breath and looked away. “No, there’s nothing to talk about. I never remember my dreams,” she lied.

Marc sighed and then released her leg. “Okay, if you say so. I thought after breakfast you might like to go out and meet the horses. Would you like that?”

Relieved, she smiled. “Yes, I’d like that a lot. I don’t guess there’s been any word on Eric’s capture.”

He rose from the bed and helped Serena to her feet. “No, it’s too early in the morning for any news like that.” He pointed to the chest. “I’m sorry you had to sleep in your clothes, but we didn’t want to wake you. I put all your things in the top two drawers last night, and I’ve laid out clean towels in the bathroom. There’s everything you could possibly want in the way of shampoo, conditioner and girly soap. I even laid out a razor if you want it.”

She laughed. “Girly soap? Thanks, I think.” She gasped when she took her first step and swayed drunkenly.

“Whoa, little lady.” Marc slid his arm around her waist. “You’re bound to be sore for a few days. You’re gonna have to let us give you a hand until you’re back on your feet.”

The heat from his body seeped through her clothing, making her nipples tighten. She could feel the moisture between her legs, and she swore silently. *Great, just what I need. The touch of a gay man is exciting me!* “I can do it.” She pulled away from his grip and made her way slowly to the chest to get some clean clothes for the day.

“There’s nothing wrong with accepting help from folks, Rena.”

“I know. I’m grateful for everything you and Tony are doing. But I’ll heal faster if I get a little exercise.” She grabbed up a pair of jeans,

fresh panties and the oversized T-shirt she normally slept in. There wouldn't be any need to struggle into a bra if she wore it around the cabin. Taking a deep breath, she turned to head toward the bathroom and found Marc standing close behind her. Startled, she took a step back. "Sorry, I didn't realize you were behind me." She gave a shaky, little laugh and looked into his eyes. If she didn't know better, she'd think there was heat in his gaze. When his mouth curled into a smile, she frowned. "What?" she asked.

"I'm just amazed how beautiful you look first thing in the morning."

"What are you rambling on about?" She pulled her clothes tight to her chest. "You should know up front that I don't handle being teased very well." The look in his eyes made her uncomfortable. It made her feel like he could see right through her.

Marc took a step closer and put his hands on her waist. "I'm not teasing you, sunshine. I wouldn't do that, not about this. You're positively beautiful this morning."

Serena held her breath and focused on his mouth as he slowly leaned closer. She let her eyes drift closed when she felt the warmth of his breath against her lips.

"Bacon's cooking, and I'm gonna start the eggs in about ten minutes."

The sound of Tony's voice brought Serena quickly back to her senses. Feeling her face flame, she pushed back from Marc's embrace. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. *How could I be so stupid? I can't come between them.*

"Wait! You don't have anything to be sorry about." Marc reached for her again.

Not wanting to deal with her embarrassment, Serena quickly squeezed around him and headed for the door. "I'm sorry I'm holding up breakfast. I'll take a fast shower, and then you guys can show me the horses." Ignoring his plea for her to stop, she hurried out of the room and walked into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

With trembling hands, she turned the lock and took a deep breath. “Get a grip on yourself, girl. If you piss these guys off, you’re going to be without protection.”

Feeling a little more settled, she turned and surveyed the room. There wasn’t much to it. A small sink and vanity with a mirror above it was next to the toilet. Bottles of deodorant, toothpaste and men’s cologne cluttered the counter top. She felt a warm feeling in her chest when she spotted her own personal items she’d packed before leaving Oregon all laid out, waiting for her. The area below the vanity was open and held stacks of towels and washcloths. Not much light came through the small window beside the shower, so Serena reached over and flipped the switch on the wall. The whirr of the overhead fan drew her gaze to the ceiling.

“Who decorated this place?” she whispered, laughing quietly. The plastic shower curtain boasted colorful pictures of various kinds of fish and round circles obviously meant to represent bubbles. When she pulled the curtain back, she discovered a small tub and shower enclosure. The shelf on the back wall held several bottles including her Wild Mountain Strawberry shampoo and conditioner.

Shaking her head, she reached over and turned on the water, flipping it to shower. She placed her clean clothes on the vanity counter and stripped down to her bare skin. After grabbing a clean towel from under the sink, she turned to get in the tub and glanced at the towel rack on the wall. There were two wet towels folded neatly at each end of the rod, leaving a blank space in between them for hers. *You think they’re trying to tell me something?* She snorted. “More likely they’re just anal.” Sighing, she checked the temperature of the water and stepped into the tub. Groaning, she savored the sluice of water down her back easing the pain of her stiff muscles.

Just hold it together a little longer, girl. They’re bound to catch that asshole soon, and you can go home.

She froze.

Home! I don't want to go back to Mountain Vista. They're never going to leave me alone. Come on, Serena. Pull yourself together. You can always move away. Alex said he'd get you a job in Portland.

Sighing, she reached for the shampoo. She had to get a move on. The guys were holding breakfast.

* * * *

"Couldn't you have given me another sixty seconds before you bellowed?" Marc complained. He glared at Tony when he turned and shot him a questioning look. "I was centimeters away from tasting those lips when you scared her off."

"I scared her off? More likely you ran her off jumping the gun, big man. Hell, her bruises haven't even faded, and you're putting the moves to her."

Marc grimaced. "Too soon, huh?"

Tony laughed. "Ya think? Give her some time to get used to us, cowboy. She'll come around."

"I guess," Marc admitted grudgingly. "I meant to ask you last night if you got everything nailed down with Jeremy."

"More like *laid* the law down."

"Why? What's up?"

"He doesn't approve of our deception on the young lady." He raised his eyebrows at Marc. "Those are his words, not mine."

Marc chuckled. "So what'd you tell him?"

"The truth, at least part of it. Hell, I don't want him thinking badly of us. We've been friends for a long time. So, I told him how the people back in Oregon mistreated her after that asshole assaulted her. Then I let him know that we're both experiencing some pretty strong feelings, and we wanted a chance to see where it would lead."

"Did he accept your explanation?"

“He did better than that. He promptly said it was best she didn’t know about us owning the ranch. At least we’d always know she picked us for love if she decides to stay on.”

Marc whistled low. “You know where that comes from, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah. His no-account ex-wife. He’s probably wishing he’d had some kind of test for her when he met her.”

“Hey, that reminds me. I saw Kaylee when she rode in with Warren and Kyle.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to see her. I’ve missed the little rug rat.”

“Yeah, well she ain’t a rug rat anymore. I nearly fell off my horse. How old is she now?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere around fourteen or fifteen I think. Why?”

“Because she looks eighteen, and I’m not the only one who noticed. I didn’t care for the way the guys were eyeing her.”

Tony pulled the skillet of eggs off the burner and poured them into a bowl. “How’d they look at her?”

“Like she’s a plump piece of turkey all laid out on a plate, and it’s Thanksgiving.”

“Shit! Are you gonna talk to them or am I?”

“Oh, I think this should be a joint effort. There’s more threat in numbers.”

Both men looked up when the bathroom door opened. Marc was the first to find his voice. “Well, look at you. There’s our beautiful houseguest.” As he watched, a flush ran from her neck up into her cheeks. “Did your shower help take the kinks out?”

“Yeah, it did.” She grinned. “I can actually walk without groaning now.”

“Well come on over here, princess. Your breakfast awaits you.” Tony pulled a chair out at the table and held out his hand.

Serena swallowed hard and walked over and placed her hand in his. Her eyes got big when he dramatically kissed her knuckles and then motioned for her to take a seat. "Everything looks great."

"It's not cordon bleu, but I think you'll find it eatable." Tony sat in the chair on her left while Marc took the one on the right.

"Looks perfect to me, guys." She looked around the table and then glanced toward the refrigerator.

"What is it, Rena? Is there something else we can get you?" Marc would get her whatever she asked for if she would just eat a decent meal. Tony had made eggs, bacon, sausage, hash browns and toast in an effort to find something that would appeal to her.

"Do, um, do you have any mustard?"

Marc shot his gaze to Tony, and was pleased to see the same puzzlement on his face that he felt. "Sure thing. I'm sure we've got some in the fridge." He got up and went to look. "Yep, got some spicy yellow mustard. Is that okay?"

"Perfect." She grinned and held her hand out for the jar. "You guys hit on the only meal of the day that I don't skimp on. My mother always told me breakfast is the most important meal of the day." She chuckled. "I know, not very original, but she was pretty old-fashioned. She'd make the most elaborate meals in the morning when I was little. Then, when I turned ten, she told me it was the only way she could be sure I was getting enough to eat because it was the only meal of the day she could supervise." She sighed longingly. "I still try to honor her traditions if I can."

"When did your mom die?" Tony passed her the meat platter.

"Eight years ago, right after I turned fifteen. She'd been sick for over a year, and it was a blessing when she finally passed on. It was a relief to know her suffering had ended."

Marc handed her the hash browns and watched as she arranged her plate. She'd put a pile of eggs in the center, and then surrounded them with pieces of bacon and sausage, basically boxing them in. Next she placed a layer of hash browns on top of the eggs.

“So you grew up with your stepfather and his sons?” Tony watched as she artfully arranged her food. “When did he marry your mother?”

Serena stiffened, and looked down at her hands. “I was ten when they married. My father had been gone for a couple of years. He died after a heart attack.” She looked up and smiled at Marc. “So, you’re going to introduce me to your horses after breakfast.”

Rena Dammler did not want to talk about her childhood. It made Marc want to investigate further. “You bet, sunshine. You’re gonna love Clyde.”

“Clyde?” She reached for the jar of mustard and unscrewed the top.

Marc watched, fascinated as she picked up a spoon and stuck it in the mustard. A quick glance at Tony showed his attention was firmly on Serena’s plate. “Uh, yeah, Clyde. He’s the horse we’ve picked out to teach you how to ride.” As Marc watched, Serena dumped a huge spoonful of mustard onto the pile of hash browns resting on her plate. He swallowed hard and put his hand over his mouth when she took her fork and stirred the spicy yellow condiment liberally through the potatoes and egg. Incredulous, he watched as she forked a huge helping of the mixture onto a sausage patty and then popped it into her mouth like an hors d’oeuvre. Briefly he shut his eyes and prayed he wouldn’t be sick.

“Is your stomach made out of steel, girl?” Tony looked at her dubiously.

Serena giggled. “Don’t knock it unless you try it. It’s delicious, and pretty much my only vice.”

Marc watched her chew, a kind of orgasmic look on her face, and shook his head. If that’s what it took to get her to eat, he’d buy stock in the mustard company. “Eat up, sunshine. We’re gonna take you to meet Clyde.”

* * * *

Serena walked slowly out of the cabin holding tightly to Marc's arm. She glanced toward the barn and stopped. "What the hell is that?" A small corral complete with wooden fence stood adjacent to the barn. In front of its closed gate was the biggest, ugliest dog she'd ever seen. He slept on his back in the sunshine, practically dead to the world.

Tony chuckled. "That's Bitsy. Don't worry. He won't hurt you."

"Bitsy?" she said in shock. "That's not a very masculine name."

Marc urged her to keep walking. "The name fit when we first got him."

Serena obediently moved toward the barn. "What made it fit?"

"He was the runt of the litter. Jeremy's daughter was visiting and went with us to pick him out." Marc grinned. "She said to get the teensy-bitsy one."

Serena snorted. "You guys are such softies."

"Could've been worse," Tony drawled. "She could've said the teeny-weeny one."

Serena laughed and looked more closely at their barn. The building looked fairly small compared to the barn she'd seen when they drove in yesterday. The wide double doors were open showing a loft up top with several visible bales of hay. "How long have you guys worked here?"

Tony stepped into the building first and looked back over his shoulder. "Five years, give or take a week or two."

"That's a long time in one place." She took a look around. There were glassless windows with wooden shutters propped open on each side letting the sunlight stream in. Straw and dirt were strewn haphazardly across the wooden floor. The narrow design of the building kept her from seeing the horses, but she could hear whinnies and huffing breath coming from the dark interior. "What's all that over there?" She pointed to a huge table with a large pegboard off to one side.

“Just some of the supplies we need to take care of the mounts.” Marc walked her over closer. “These are curry combs and brushes we use for grooming and over here is where we store the tack.”

“What’s tack?”

“Everything we need to harness our horses.” Marc pointed to the corner. “Those are food and water troughs and clean bales of hay for when we muck out the stalls.”

“What do you feed them?”

“We’ve got a special grain we add to their diet for added nutrition. Over there are our saddles and one we thought you could use.” Tony walked over and opened the shutters of another window.

Serena couldn’t stop her laugh. “They look like little miniature versions of those mechanical bulls you see in western movies.” The saddles were stored on a type of sawhorse, and they looked like little ponies saddled for riding.

“You ready to meet the horses?” Marc asked. He motioned for her to follow him.

Taking a deep breath, she trailed along behind the men. The straw smelled dusty and slightly sweet with an earthy mix of manure. She was surprised to find it wasn’t unpleasant. As they moved deeper into the darkness, she saw the back divided into small stalls. She started when Marc let out a clicking sound and a row of noses suddenly appeared over the stall doors. She could hear the horses snorting and the wood creaking as they pushed their massive bodies against the wood. A trickle of sweat rolled down the side of her face. “Wow, they’re, um, big.”

“Come a little closer, sunshine. They won’t hurt you.” Marc held out his hand.

After just a moment of hesitation, she allowed him to pull her forward. “He’s beautiful.”

“He’s a she, Rena.” Marc laughed. “This is White Sox. She’s a Bay mare.” He blew softly on the horse’s nose. “We’ve been together

a long time.” He walked to the next stall. “This here is Hombre. He belongs to Tony.”

She looked closely and then glanced back at the first stall. White Sox had a brown coat with white around each hoof while Hombre appeared to be solid black. “They’re not the same kind of horse, are they?”

Tony walked forward. “No, Hombre is an Overo gelding.” He ran his hand between the horse’s eyes. “He’s not really the best choice for the ranch because he doesn’t do well on trails, but he and I have a mutual understanding. I don’t mistreat him, and he doesn’t mistreat me.”

Serena laughed. “And back there?” She looked at the last stall, but didn’t see anything.

“This is Clyde.” Marc grinned. He did that strange clicking sound and the biggest horse she’d ever seen came walking over to the gate. “He’s for you.”

She took an involuntary step back and eyed the animal warily. “I can’t ride a horse that big. I don’t have any experience. I’ll fall off and bust my ass, or worse.”

Both men walked over and put their arms around her. Tony kissed her on the cheek while Marc held her chin forcing her to meet his gaze. “You never have to worry about that when you’re with us, sunshine. Everybody falls from time to time, and we’ll always be there to catch you when you fall.”

Serena stared at him in shock. Her heart beat a little faster at his words, knowing deep down that he didn’t mean them the way she wanted him to. *These men are going to break my heart before I leave here.*

“Come on, don’t be afraid. Come meet him.” Marc pulled her toward the waiting animal. Hold your hand out and let him sniff your fingers.”

“He’s not a dog.” She stepped closer with her arm extended and jumped when the horse’s head pushed out, his nose working its way into her hand.

“See, he likes you.” Tony pulled a piece of carrot out of his pocket and handed it to her. “Put this flat on your palm and hold it right up to his mouth.”

Serena followed his instructions and swallowed hard when she felt the hairy tickle of his lips on her hand as the carrot disappeared. “Man, that tickles,” she complained.

Tony hugged her tight and placed a kiss on her cheek. “You’re gonna do just fine, princess.”

Unnerved by the kiss, Serena wiped her hand on her jeans. “What kind of horse is Clyde?”

“He’s a thirteen-year-old Sorrell gelding. He can’t hurt you, Rena. He’s dead broke, perfect for kids and first time riders. There isn’t a more gentle animal on the ranch.”

Suddenly, Serena felt excitement about the possibilities. “So, am I gonna get to ride today?”

“Absolutely not,” Marc decreed. “You aren’t getting anywhere near a saddle for at least another week. You’re already sore, and riding’s gonna make it worse.”

“He’s right,” Tony added. “Besides, you’re gonna need some new clothes before we take you out on the ranch.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” she asked.

“Honey, I helped you pack, remember? You’ve got shorts and T-shirts, but only one pair of jeans. You’re gonna need some western wear.”

“Okay, let’s get some.”

Marc rolled his eyes. “It ain’t that easy, sunshine. We’ll have to go to Grays Prairie to do the shopping, and it’ll be a few days before you’re up to making the trip.”

Tony took her hands. “Be patient. We’ll get to the good stuff.”

“Hey, anybody home? Where is everyone?”

Serena turned at the sound of a female voice outside.

“Hey, that’s Kaylee,” Tony cried. Both men walked toward the barn door, tugging Serena along with them.

“Kaylee, what are you doing out riding by yourself? Does your dad know where you are?” Tony asked.

The young girl sighed. “He knows I’m riding, just not exactly where I’m riding.” She glanced at Serena. “Hi, I’m Kaylee. My dad’s the foreman here.”

“I’m sorry,” Marc spoke up. “Kaylee, this is our friend, Rena Dammler.”

“Pleased to meet you, Kaylee. That’s a beautiful horse you have.”

Kaylee leaned forward and ran her hand along the animal’s neck. “Isn’t he? He’s one of Tony’s best.”

“Tony’s? He belongs to—”

“Kaylee, your dad told us you were riding with the guys, not off gallivanting around by yourself,” Tony interrupted.

The young girl looked uncomfortable for a moment, and then set her lips in a firm line. “I’m sixteen years old, and I don’t need a babysitter. Warren and Kyle need to be concentrating on their work and not trying to find ways to entertain me.” She gave the men a pleading look. “Please don’t rat me out to Dad. I promise I won’t go any further than the line cabin.” She looked over toward the back of the barn. “I want to use the swimming hole.”

Tony gave Marc a questioning look and then turned his attention back to Kaylee. “All right, for now. But only to the creek and back, Kaylee. I mean it. If you don’t follow the rules, I’ll make sure Jeremy grounds you.”

Kaylee giggled. “Please. He’s not gonna ground me. He’s thrilled I’m out on a horse and not asking him for the keys to his car.” She smiled proudly. “I got my driver’s license just before I flew out.”

Marc laughed. “Lord, help us. Another woman driver on Texas roads.” He laughed even harder when the young girl stuck out her tongue.

“Maybe in a few days we could go to the creek together, Kaylee.” Serena gave her a friendly smile. Something about the young girl pulled at her heart.

“I’d like that, Rena.” She made a funny sound with her mouth and pulled on the reins to turn the horse around. “I gotta be getting back. I promised Dad I’d be back in time for lunch. See you guys later.” Without waiting for a response, she dug her knees into the horse’s sides and yelled “ya.” It only took a few moments for the horse to disappear down the road.

“She seems like a really nice kid. I like her,” Serena said.

“Yeah, she’s great. You’ll be good company for her while you’re here. I don’t like the idea of her wandering around the ranch by herself.” Tony took Serena’s hand and started walking back toward the cabin.

“She seems pretty levelheaded to me. What kind of trouble can she get into?”

“The men that work on the ranch are decent folk, but I’m afraid when they look at Kaylee, they ain’t gonna see a sixteen-year-old girl.” He waited for Marc to open the cabin door. “She’s at a strange age and testing her new womanly skills. I’d just soon she not find test subjects at the End of the Road Haven.”

Serena turned around to comment and watched as Tony let Bitsy come inside. “You really think it’s a good idea for him to be in here? Does he have fleas?”

“Does he look like he has fleas to you?” Tony asked. He rolled his eyes. “Don’t answer that. He’s used to being inside whenever we’re here. He wants his dinner right now.” He gave her a cajoling look. “He won’t be any trouble, I promise. He’ll just eat and lay by the door until we head out.”

She watched as he walked over to the kitchen area and pulled a can from the cabinet. Frowning, she walked closer and read the label as he used the metal can opener. “Chili? You’re feeding that dog chili?”

Marc laughed. "That's all he'll eat ever since Tony let him share our dinners last winter." He gave her a wicked grin. "Better prepare yourself, sunshine. His dinner's gonna give him gas something fierce."

Grimacing, Serena watched the dog wolf down the food in the bowl. She jumped when Marc walked up behind her and slid his arms around her waist. His fingers felt warm clasped tightly against her stomach as she struggled to take a breath. She could feel the tips of her breasts bead, aching for the touch of his hands. "What are you doing?" she asked shakily.

"You smell really good, like that strawberry shampoo you brought with you." He lowered his face to her shoulder and sniffed behind her ear.

Serena trembled when Tony stopped in front of her and lowered his head to smell behind her other ear. *Oh, God, what're they doing?*

"You're right, Marc. She's smells good enough to eat." He pulled back and looked into her eyes. Leaning down, he placed a feather light kiss against her lips. "We're just taking care of you, princess. We want you to concentrate on healing so we can get to know each other better."

"Better?" Serena squeaked. She felt a soft caress on the skin behind her ear. *Did Marc just lick me?* "Uh, I think it might be a good idea if I lay down and rest for a while. I'm still feeling a bit tired from the trip." Frantic to get away, she pulled away from Marc's hold and hurried into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Whatever their game was, she wasn't sure she wanted to play.

Chapter 6

Tony turned over in the narrow bed and lightly ran his hand through the soft hairs on Marc's chest. Leaning in, he captured his mouth in a deep but short kiss, their tongues twining together. His hand trailed down the lean stomach and stroked the thick cock rising from a nest of dark brown curls. "Wanna start the day off right?" he whispered, dipping his tongue into Marc's ear and then dragging it along the sensitive skin of his neck. He sucked lightly against his shoulder, and then harder, leaving a mark.

"Don't I always?" Marc groaned. His teeth nipped into the fleshy part of Tony's arm as he thrust his hips back and forth.

"You gotta be quiet." Tony slid down further in the bed and flattened his tongue over Marc's nipple, savoring his musky scent and salty taste. He gently tugged with his teeth, enjoying the feel of the hardened nub against his tongue.

"Man, don't make me wait," Marc pleaded. "I'm not gonna last."

Tony lightly bit the erect nipple and then soothed it with his tongue before sliding to the foot of the bed. He crawled up between Marc's spread legs, his eyes locked on the man's morning erection. His tongue glided along his inner thigh while he pumped his hand up and down his lover's firm length. Settling his fist around the root, he licked across the broad, mushroom-shaped head, brushing the slit and savoring the drops of pre-cum gathering.

"Shit, Tony. Suck it."

Chuckling, he flicked his tongue over the rounded tip of Marc's cock, licking the sensitive head with slow deliberation, before guiding it into his mouth. Gratified to hear his lover's needy groan, he began

sucking in earnest. Marc's hips flexed, forcing him deeper until Tony could feel the head of his partner's cock hitting the back of his throat. He pulled away and cupped Marc's heavy sac. "Come on my tongue, lover. Give me what I need." Opening wide, he swallowed the pulsing shaft down to the root and squeezed the balls cupped in his hand.

"God, I'm gonna..." Marc allowed his fingers to tangle in Tony's hair. He stiffened for a moment and then came with a growl. His hips jerked, the semen spurting into the back of Tony's throat.

Tony licked his partner clean and ran his fingers below his balls, tracing the lower crease of his ass. "Turn over," he whispered. He pulled back while Marc turned onto his side. Moving in close behind him, he squeezed his ass cheeks with one hand while he reached for the tube of lube on the bedside table with the other. "I wanna bury myself in this tight ass of yours."

"Do it, man. Fuck me."

Tony dragged his tongue up the curve of Marc's spine and squirted the lubricant onto his hand. He slid a slickened finger into the cleft of his buttocks and pressed against his hidden entrance, letting it trace around the puckered opening before penetrating the tight muscles of his ass. After just a moment he added a second finger and began scissoring them back and forth. "Your ass is clenching my fingers. I can't wait to feel it on my cock."

"Damn it. Quit dicking around, and fuck me."

A quick glance over Marc's shoulder revealed his lover's hand stroking back and forth along his renewed erection. Laughing softly, Tony positioned himself at the entrance of Marc's body and pressed forward. Slowly he forced the length of his shaft inside, the muscles in his thighs quivering as pleasure shot into his balls. Then, in one powerful thrust, he slid home. "God, you're so blessed tight," he cried out.

"Give it to me hard, cowboy."

Tony grabbed Marc's hips and rode him without mercy, pumping in and out in a fierce rhythm. The muscles in that tight ass flexed,

squeezing Tony's shaft in an almost painful embrace. He felt his balls draw up tight right before his cock jerked, releasing his seed deep into the warm body beside him. Convulsing with pleasure, he closed his eyes to savor the fiery warmth of his lover's body. Exhausted, his limp form collapsed partially on top of Marc.

"Damn," Marc groaned. "That was good."

Tony slid his softening cock away and lay back on the pillow. "Gets better each time." He listened carefully for a moment. "Do you think we woke her up?"

"I hope so." Marc snorted. "We've both been giving her little kisses and touching her as much as possible for the last week."

"Don't remind me." Tony growled. "I've been hard as a damn rock ever since we brought her home. If she don't figure it out soon, my balls are gonna drop off."

"Maybe we're being too subtle."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Less subtlety and more action."

"Sounds good, but specifics please. It's too damn early in the morning for me to come up with sneaky ideas."

"Not sneaky. Not this time. I think we should just lay our cards on the table."

Tony leaned up on one elbow and gazed down at Marc. "What's going through that devious mind of yours?"

"Nothing devious about it. We're running out of time. We can only keep her here for so long before she finds out Abernathy is already in custody."

"Yeah, she's gonna go ballistic when she finds out they caught him before we brought her here. And that's nothing compared to what she'll do when she finds out we own this place."

"We'll cross that bridge when we have to. Hopefully, she'll be so enamored with us by then she won't care."

"So, what's your immediate plan?"

"A little seduction by the lake, or maybe I should say the pond."

“Huh?”

“We’ve already promised to take her to town today for some riding clothes. Let’s take her to Grays Prairie for the shopping, and we can call and have Millie pack us up a picnic lunch. We’ll stop and pick it up on the way back and take her over to the swimming hole for a little outdoor afternoon delight.”

“You think she’ll go for it?”

Marc laughed softly. “Man, she’s so ripe she’s about to fall off the tree. Haven’t you seen the fire in her eyes the last few days? Hell, I’ve been worried she’d get fed up and go looking to somebody else for relief.” He shook his head. “Ain’t no way she’ll turn us down. We just gotta put on the charm and show her three’s better than one.”

* * * *

“Give it to me hard, baby”

Serena gritted her teeth at the sound of Marc’s voice coming through the closed door. They were trying to drive her insane. For the past ten days they’d touched her every chance they got and had kissed her countless times. Not really romantic kisses, but their lips on her skin just the same. Every night she’d had to lie in her bed and listen to the sounds of their passion. *They’re supposed to be gay. If I didn’t know better, I’d think they were trying to get something on with me.*

She thought back to her impromptu walk a couple of days ago. Cooped up in the cabin for too long, she wanted some fresh air. The guys had been off, doing whatever it is they do on the ranch, leaving her alone with her thoughts. They had warned her to stay in the cabin when they were gone, but she hadn’t thought a brief walk within sight of the place could hurt. She decided to just go and visit with Clyde in the barn.

She walked out, patting the sleeping Bitsy on the head, and ambled over to the barn. A sound from inside had her stopping a few feet from the doors. Quietly, she’d gone over to the window and

peered inside. The sight of Tony bent over a hay bale with his pants down around his knees had made her mouth go dry. Unable to tear herself away, she'd watched Marc pounding into Tony's ass until they both cried out, and Tony's erection had erupted all over the barn floor. She'd fled back to the house and locked herself in the bedroom wishing fervently she'd packed her vibrator in her suitcase.

Sighing, she heard another groan from the front room and allowed her hands to cup her breasts gently through the soft cotton shirt. Her thumbs tweaked across the hardening tips, causing her to bite back a cry of pleasure. She plucked at her nipples, rolling the hard nubs between her thumb and forefinger reveling in the tiny bite of pain. Little tremors of excitement coursed through her body settling in her groin.

Stifling a groan, she trailed one hand down her stomach and let it disappear beneath the waist of her panties. Aggressively she pushed aside the soaked material and plunged two fingers into her hot, silky folds. Her eyes closed, and she opened her legs a little wider as her finger slid down her drenched slit. Stroking gently, she found her swollen clit, pinching it sensuously between her fingers. Back and forth she let her fingertips glide over the swollen nub, moving in and out of her hot sheath. Her breathing quickened as her body strained toward a peak. Bright colors swirled behind her closed eyelids as the orgasm washed over her body. Years of practice kept her mouth shut, her pleasure silent.

Serena couldn't stop the tears escaping from her eyes. The loneliness felt like a heavy chain around her neck. She was beginning to care for the men and knew she would never be able to fit into their lives. *At least we're getting out of here today. Maybe I can just pretend for a while they belong to me.*

* * * *

“Do you really think all this is necessary?” Serena asked, eyeing the pile of clothes warily.

“Absolutely,” replied the young saleswoman. She’d introduced herself as Esther the minute they’d walked through the door of the small clothing store. “Your men said you needed everything.”

My men. What a concept that is! She turned and looked at herself in the full-length mirror again. “Nobody would even recognize me,” she mumbled. They’d dressed her in skintight jeans, a snap front western shirt and cowboy boots. Definitely not her normal fashion statement.

“Sunshine, that look is you.” Marc grinned.

Serena rolled her eyes and glanced at the pile of things lying on the chair. “Come on, Marc. Four pairs of jeans, six western short sleeve shirts and two long sleeve ones, a sweater jacket, and a pair of boots. Did I miss anything?”

“Yeah, this.” Tony walked over and dropped a cowboy hat on her head. “Now you’re perfect.”

“How long do you think it’s going to take them to catch Eric Abernathy? You’ve got clothes here I couldn’t possible wear before cold weather sets in. Do you really think that’s necessary?”

“Better to be safe than sorry. Besides, doesn’t it get cold in Mountain Vista? It’s not like they’ll go to waste.” Marc scooped up the stack of clothing and handed it to Esther. “Wrap this up for us, honey. She’ll just wear what she’s got on.”

“Wait, I can’t afford all this. Let me just take a couple of everything, and I’ll plan on washing every couple of days.”

“No problem, princess. We’ve got this covered.” Tony gave her a big smile.

Serena felt her mouth drop open. *They can’t afford to be throwing money around like this unless cowboys make a lot more money than I think they do. Hell, they can’t even afford to live in a decent house.* “I can’t let you buy my clothes, Tony.”

“Why not?” he demanded to know.

“It’s not right.” She growled. “You shouldn’t be so willing to waste your money like this. They might find that man tomorrow, and all this would have been for nothing.” She took a step back as Marc came to stand directly in front of her, and she came to an abrupt stop when she met the solid, muscled wall of Tony’s chest. She hadn’t seen him come up behind her. She looked up into Marc’s brown eyes.

“We’re happy to do this, Rena. It’s not a hardship on us. You might as well sit back and enjoy it because we’re not giving in.”

“But....” She shivered when she felt Tony’s lips against the lobe of her ear.

“No buts, little girl.” He licked the skin behind her ear. “You have no idea what seeing you in these clothes does to us, princess.”

Serena swallowed hard and fought closing her eyes at the feel of the warm, wet tongue. She held her breath when Marc stepped close enough for her breasts to touch his chest. He pulled the hat off her head and buried his face in her hair. *Ohgodohgodohgod!*

“You smell so damn good.” Marc’s lips whispered across the top of her head.

“So does that mean you’re definitely taking everything?” Esther asked.

The sound of the saleswoman’s voice had Serena jerking away from the two men. She could feel herself flushing as she faced the smirking woman. “Uh, yeah, whatever they say.” She stood quietly while Marc took care of the bill, and then followed them meekly back out to the car.

“Hop on in, Rena.” Tony held the door for her. “We’ve got a surprise for you.”

“What kind of surprise?” she asked suspiciously.

“Don’t be so damn negative.” Marc chuckled as he slid into the driver’s seat. “You’re gonna love this surprise.”

* * * *

“Are we there yet?” Serena gripped the edges of the truck seat, her fingers digging into the leather. “This isn’t a good idea, guys. I’m getting really carsick.” They’d driven from the clothing store over to Millie’s Diner and picked up a huge basket. It looked like they were driving back to the ranch, but a half hour into the trip Marc pulled over to the side of the road and watched while Tony tied a scarf around her head as a blindfold.

“Just five more minutes, sunshine.”

She held on tighter as the truck rolled on the uneven road and then relaxed when they came to an abrupt stop. She reached for the ties of the scarf.

“Not yet,” Tony cried.

Serena heard the sound of his jeans sliding along the leather seat as he slid out of the truck, and then she felt his hand on her arm pulling her toward the open door. “Did I mention that I really hate surprises?” she asked. She stood still for a moment and tried to get a feel for where they’d taken her. There was a slight breeze ruffling the hairs around her face, and she could feel the heat from the sun. The squawk of a bird and the sound of flapping wings had her head turning sharply to the right. Inhaling deeply, she smelled wildflowers and wet earth with a hint of decaying leaves. “Where are we?”

“At our favorite place on the ranch.” Tony pulled the scarf from her eyes and smiled. “We’re taking you on a picnic, princess.”

Serena looked around in amazement. It looked like a picture in a book. Tall trees shaded one side of the small stream, the leaves rustling in the constant breeze. Walking closer she could hear the water washing over the rocks as it flowed downstream. Leaves, reeds and small sticks flowed leisurely in the current. Along the bank she could see dandelions, daisies, and even some wild strawberries mixed in with the broken branches and waterlogged sticks. The sight of three horses grazing among the trees had her turning to the men. “What are the horses doing here?”

Marc grabbed the picnic basket from the back of the truck. “Jeremy and Kaylee brought them over for us this morning while we were shopping.” He grinned as he reached for the blanket folded over the seat. “We’re gonna teach you to ride today.”

She froze in place, a feeling of dread rushing through her senses. “No way, Jose. Absolutely not, not happening. Nada.” Her eyes narrowed. “Am I making myself clear?”

“You think she’s trying to tell us something?” Tony chuckled.

“Come on, sunshine,” Marc pleaded. “There’s nothing to be scared of. We’ll be with you every step of the way.” He pulled her close as his voice dropped to a sexy whisper. “I promise you’ll love it if you give it a chance.”

“They’re too big. I’ll end up falling off and breaking something.”

Tony cupped her cheek, his thumb caressing back and forth. “We’ll be there to catch you if you fall. I promise.”

“Let’s compromise.” Marc put his arm around her shoulders and began leading her toward the trees. “We’ll curl up on this blanket and enjoy the lunch Millie packed. We can talk and get to know each other a little better, and when you’re more comfortable, we’ll re-introduce you to Clyde. What do you say?”

Serena resisted his efforts to pull her along. Having a cozy little picnic seemed like a really bad idea. She dreamed about the two men every night in a romantic way even though she knew nothing could come of it. Even if they felt the same way she could never see herself settling down in some tiny cabin in the middle of nowhere. The dreams frightened her. They were so real, and they made her feel things she’d never felt before.

“Come on,” Tony cajoled. “We’ve got fried chicken, potato salad, and *chocolate!*”

“Great!” She snorted. “Now you’re threatening to make me fat.” Reluctantly, she allowed them to lead her over to the trees not far from the grazing animals. Marc spread out the bright, orange blanket and motioned for her to sit down. Grinning, she looked up at him.

“You plan on serving me?” She sat down with her legs crossed and then yelped when Tony stretched out beside her and laid his head in her lap.

“I don’t know about Marc, but I’m expecting you to feed me.”

She snickered at the little boy pout on his face. “Forget it. You’d probably nibble at my fingers the same way Clyde did.”

Marc finished setting out the food and joined them on the blanket. Wagging his brows, he leered at her. “I wanna nibble on more than your fingers, pretty lady.”

Serena frowned. *Why the hell are they being so flirtatious? Oh, God, what if they heard stories about me while they were in Mountain Vista? Several of the nurses at the hospital went to school with me. They probably figure I’d be willing to have a little fun while we’re stuck here. I’m something new to play with. Damn, that thought should make me angry, not excited.* She cleared her throat. “So, what do we have to eat?”

Marc exchanged a look with Tony and then started pulling tops off of containers. “Looks like some mighty fine fried chicken.” He pulled the top off another bowl. “And this has some sliced apples and grapes.”

Tony pulled the foil off a plate and groaned. “Chocolate éclairs! I’ve died and gone to chocolate heaven.” He waved one of the pastries in front of Serena’s mouth. “Can the fair lady be tempted?”

Wanting to play their game, she leaned forward and sank her teeth into the rich chocolate, pulling off a large bite. Both men seemed to stop breathing as they avidly watched her lick the white filling from her lips. “Hmm, delicious,” she moaned. She swallowed hard when they reached down to adjust their obvious erections. “So, um, tell me, how long have you two been together?”

Marc handed her a plate filled with chicken and fruit. “Nine years now. We met when we were partnered up at the agency.”

“What agency?” Serena accepted a bottle of water from Tony.

“Drug Enforcement Agency, princess.”

She froze, the bottle just inches from her lips. “You were DEA agents?”

“For four years.” Tony rubbed his hand across his forehead. “We didn’t hook up personally until about six months before we retired.”

She picked up a chicken leg and licked her lips. “You’re both awfully young. Why’d you retire?”

Marc gave Tony a look she couldn’t decipher. “Don’t,” he warned Tony.

“No reason not to tell her. It’s not like you can hide the damn scar.” He turned his attention to Serena. “Marc took a bullet to his leg on one of our missions.”

“Oh, no,” she cried.

“Fraid so,” Marc confirmed. “Left me with a permanent limp and a nice invitation to retire early that I couldn’t refuse.” He shrugged his shoulders. “They didn’t think a man with my injuries could do the job anymore.”

“But we both know they were wrong.” Tony ran his hand over Marc’s jean covered thigh.

“That explains his retirement. What about you, Tony?”

“Where he goes, I go. We were already an item by then, and I wasn’t about to leave him alone during all that painful rehab.” He sighed. “I was tired of the job anyway. We both wanted to settle down to a more normal life. Hell, we wanted a home of our own instead of the little sterile apartment we lived in.”

Serena thought about the little impersonal cabin they were living in and decided not to say anything. “What brought you to Texas?”

“That’s easy. We both dreamed of being cowboys when we were little boys.” Marc turned up the bottle of water and drained half before speaking again. “The horses and cows don’t give a damn if I limp or not.”

“And the bounty hunting?” She asked.

“Gives us a little extra money from time to time, and it’s enough to satisfy that little piece of us that still yearns for excitement.” Tony threw his plate aside. “What’s your story, Rena?”

“Nothing exciting to tell. I was born and raised in Mountain Vista.”

“What about your family? You’ve got two brothers. Are there any sisters?” Marc asked.

Serena felt a shiver roll over her body. “I’m an only child. I don’t have any brothers or sisters.”

Marc looked puzzled. “What about Daniel and Joseph? I thought they were your brothers.”

“They’re Raymond’s sons, but I don’t consider them brothers.”

“Don’t get along, huh?” Marc looked sympathetic. “How old were you when your mother married Raymond?”

“I was ten.” She blinked rapidly to hold back her tears. “She died of cancer five years later. Raymond felt obligated to keep me around since I had no other relatives.”

“What about your dad?” Tony sat up and reached for the éclairs.

“He died not long after my eighth birthday.”

He handed Marc one of the pastries and took one for himself. “So you lived with the evil stepfather and his devil spawn for how long?” Both men scooted closer to her.

“Uh,” she eyed them warily. “I moved out the day I turned eighteen and never looked back.”

“What about college?” Marc asked.

She shrugged. “No money. I went to the community college and got an Associate degree as a Paralegal. I’ve been taking care of myself ever since.” She stared off into space. “Someday I’ll catch myself a rich husband, and I’ll never have to worry about needing someone to take care of me again.” She tensed as they moved even closer and pressed up against both her thighs. “What do you think you’re doing?” As she watched, they teasingly tore off bits of the chocolate covered cakes and moved them closer to her lips.

“Just tempting you to a little sugar delight,” Tony drawled.

She reached to take a bite and then scowled when they drew them out of her reach. “You’re liable to get hurt trying to keep a woman from her dessert.”

“Oh, we’re gonna give you your dessert, princess.” Tony took his finger and scooped out some of the white filling and then rubbed it over her lips with a sensual caress. “What are you willing to do for it?”

Serena stared at him in shock. *With that look in your eye, you could get me to do just about anything.*

Marc leaned forward and licked the creamy mixture off her lips before she could do it herself. “You took too long to answer, sunshine.”

“What is it you want?” she whispered.

“Everything.” Tony’s finger rubbed more of the sweet across her mouth and then leaned in and kissed it off.

Serena savored the feel of his firm lips against hers for just a moment and then raised her hands and pushed against his chest. “Okay, truth time.” She struggled to keep her anger contained. “Let me guess. You heard what a little slut I am, and you figured you’d test out the merchandise while we wait on Eric to be caught.” She pulled herself back at the looks of anger that came over both men’s face.

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” Marc argued. “And don’t ever let me hear you refer to yourself that way again.”

“Then why are you teasing me this way?” she asked in a subdued voice.

“We’re not teasing, Rena.” Tony slid closer and put his arm around her shoulder. “We feel something when we’re around you, and we both want to find out what it is.”

“So you’re saying you didn’t hear anything about my reputation in Mountain Vista?”

Marc barked out a quick laugh. “Yeah, we heard plenty, but we took into account who we heard it from and dismissed it.” His arm

joined Tony's around her shoulders. "Honey, even if it's true, it doesn't matter. Your past is just that. Past. We're both more interested in the future."

"Hell, we've both done things that would probably curl your hair if you knew about them," Tony added. "We just want you to give us a chance to see where things might go."

"But you're gay."

"Not gay, sunshine. We're bisexual. We both like women just fine. We just happened to fall in love with each other. Doesn't mean we wouldn't welcome a fairer sex into our relationship." Marc gave her a big smile.

"The right fairer sex," Tony added. "So, are you willing to give us a chance and just see where the relationship takes us?"

Serena shook her head. "I gotta be honest, guys. I can't see myself ever being happy living in a little cabin in Texas." She frowned. "A little cabin that doesn't even have cable television."

Tony snorted. "Why don't you let us worry about that for now? If it wasn't for the way we live, would you give us a chance?"

She bit her bottom lip. "Well, sure. You guys are really hot."

"Don't say anything else," Marc said. "Give us a chance to see where the relationship goes. I promise you won't be sorry. We'll go as slow as you want."

"Or as fast." Tony grinned.

She glanced at Tony and then over to Marc. "Okay, as long as we stay honest with each other and nobody gets their feelings hurt." She waited for them to say something, but they only nodded. "So?" She asked shakily. "What do we do now?"

Marc leaned forward first and pressed a gentle kiss against her mouth. He pulled back slightly and smiled then ran his tongue along her bottom lip.

"My turn," Tony cried. Not wasting any time, he sealed his lips over hers and plunged his tongue into her mouth for a quick, but thorough, sweep. When he ended the kiss he stayed close enough for

her to feel his breath against her face when he spoke. “Do you know what we want to do now?” He whispered.

“No! Wh—um...what do you want to do now?”

Smiling wickedly, he licked a path from her chin to her ear. “Now,” his breath tickled the lobe of her ear, “we wanna teach you how to ride.”

Chapter 7

“You asshole!” She laughed and pushed him over on his side.

“Come on, sunshine.” Marc stood and pulled her to her feet. “It’s time to pay the piper.”

“Guys, the chicken was good but not good enough to warrant getting up on that huge horse.”

Tony joined Marc in pulling her toward the grazing animals. “You’ve got nothing to be afraid of. We’ll be right there with you every step of the way. It’s perfectly safe.”

“Safe, my Aunt Fanny! That saddle has to be at least seven feet off the ground. I could break a leg falling off that sucker.” She turned around and tried to walk away. “What if he doesn’t like me?”

Marc stepped in front of her and laughed. “You’re definitely exaggerating. It’s nowhere near seven feet off the ground. He’s gonna love you, sunshine. Clyde loves everybody. He’s the gentlest horse you’ll ever meet.”

“Besides,” Tony guided her toward the horses again, “we already told you we’d be there to catch you if you fall.”

Serena tried another tactic. “This seems like a waste of time to me. I mean, they could catch Eric today, and then I’d have to head back to Oregon.”

“You in that big a hurry to go home?” Tony asked.

“No, but I’m realistic. You guys will have to go back to work soon, and so will I. I can’t live off my savings forever.”

“Come on, sunshine. Trust us.” Marc held out his hand. “Take a chance. You won’t be sorry.”

Sighing in defeat, Serena placed her hand in his. She almost pulled away from the tingling sensation that ran up her arm when his large, warm hand closed over her smaller one. She started when the horse turned his head and nudged at their clasped fingers.

"See, he remembers you." Marc rubbed the area between Clyde's eyes. "He's hoping you've got a carrot stick hidden somewhere."

"Sorry, big guy." She patted the horse's head awkwardly.

"Don't worry about it, princess. We'll give him a special treat tonight." Tony moved closer. "This lesson is just about riding. We'll teach you the proper way to saddle him another day. Come a little closer." He motioned her forward. "You always want to mount a horse from the left."

Taking a deep breath, Serena moved closer. "I hope you know what you're doing," she murmured. She knew there were questions she should be asking, but the fear inside kept her lips pressed tightly together.

Tony grabbed her hand. "Place your left hand on the reins on the saddle, or you can grab the mane. There isn't any nerve endings connected there so you can't hurt him." He looked at her through lowered lashes. "You with me so far?"

"Yeah," she squeaked and then cleared her throat. "Yes, I understand."

"Okay, place your left foot in the stirrup." When she looked puzzled he pointed to a triangular shaped metal loop with rounded edges hanging down from the saddle. "Put your foot through there. You're gonna hold tight to the saddle and bounce three times for momentum. On three, pull yourself up and swing your right leg over the saddle, and you'll come down on your butt right where you're supposed to be."

She looked at him incredulously. "You've got to be kidding."

Marc snickered, and then covered his smile with his hand. "No, sunshine, he's not kidding. Don't worry, we're gonna give you an extra boost when you're ready to swing your leg over."

"You ready to give it a try?" Tony asked.

Afraid to speak, she nodded. Focusing on the horse, she raised her foot and put it in the stirrup, holding onto the saddle for dear life. As high up as it was she wasn't going to have much room to bounce, but she'd give it her best shot. Slowly she counted as she let her body go up and down. "One." She bounced again. "Two." She took a deep breath. "Three," she squawked as they gave her a boost with both men's hands planted firmly on her ass. With a little grunting and pushing she found herself sitting in the saddle.

"That's it, sunshine. You did great." Marc patted her on the leg before walking around to the other side and sliding her foot into the other stirrup. She held her breath, conscious of sitting so far off the ground, while they shortened the stirrups to fit her shorter legs.

"Just relax, Rena. The horse will sense if you're nervous," Tony told her soothingly.

Serena nodded, holding on to the saddle for dear life. She couldn't contain her squeal, her legs tightening in fear when Clyde shifted beneath her.

"Come on, princess. You gotta relax those legs, or you'll cut off Clyde's air supply." Tony rubbed her thigh gently. "Take a deep breath. You're doing real good."

She looked down at him and smiled. "Okay, hotshot. What now?"

"Just a few more instructions and then we'll go for a short ride."

"Better be a very short one," she said through gritted teeth.

Marc laughed. "Okay, darlin', we'll go easy on you today. To make him go forward, you just squeeze his sides lightly with your legs and rock your hips forward. That will start him in a gentle walk."

"Okay, how to I stop him? And you better not tell me I need to say *whoa*."

"You don't have to say anything at all," Tony said. "Just pull back gently on the reins, and he'll know you want him to stop. Make sure it's a gentle pull and not too hard, or you could hurt his mouth."

Marc walked up, leading the other two horses. "Rena, keep your heels down and your hands light on the reins. Let your hips move with the horse's motion, and you'll do fine."

As she watched, Tony went over and got on his horse. Watching him swing into the saddle, those lean hips turning with muscles bunching in his skintight jeans, her mouth went dry. She could feel herself flush when he caught her staring.

Marc nudged his own horse and brought him up next to Clyde. "You ready to go for a leisurely stroll?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. You're going to stay close, right?"

"I promise we'll be with you every step of the way. We're gonna put you in the middle so we can keep an eye on you."

Tony grinned and winked. "Yep, we're gonna keep you right in the middle."

Marc growled. "Ignore him, Rena. He's thinking with the wrong head right now. Just remember to stay over near us and try not to let Clyde take you over into the trees."

Serena frowned. "Why do I need to stay out of the trees?"

"It's just a precaution. Clyde should be fine, but we had a gelding last year that liked to take inexperienced riders up in the tree line. He'd get them really close to one of the larger trees and literally knock the rider off his back." Tony broke down laughing and could barely talk. "After the third time, we sold him to a children's park that didn't have any trees."

Serena shook her head and followed their instructions to get Clyde moving. "Hey, it worked. He's moving," she said with excitement in her voice. As the horses headed downstream, she rolled back and forth in the saddle, trying to keep herself upright. It was definitely harder than it looked.

"Relax a little, princess," Tony encouraged. "Try to guide him gently. It doesn't take much to get a feel for him."

Serena listened but didn't try to answer while she concentrated on not falling off Clyde's back. Before she knew it, they'd traveled a

pretty good ways downstream, and Marc was turning them around to go back. "I can't believe how much strain I'm feeling in my back and legs."

"That's why we're keeping this ride short. We've got some great lotion back at the cabin. A little massage should fix you right up." Tony cut his eyes over to Marc. "Trust us. We'll take good care of you."

Serena felt dampness gathering between her thighs, and suddenly she could swear the saddle was rubbing her clit back and forth. She cleared her throat a couple of times before she could get words to come out. "Uh, that won't be necessary. I'm sure a hot shower will fix whatever ails me."

"Oh, you'll get your hot shower." Tony brought the horses to a stop and jumped down. He came over to stand next to her. "Then you'll get your massage." He pulled her right foot out of the stirrup and waited for Marc to stand next to her on the other side. "Okay, princess, to get down just put your weight on your left foot in the stirrup and swing your right leg over the back of the horse and drop down to the ground on that leg. When you feel balanced, you can remove your left foot from the stirrup."

Marc put his hand on her leg. "Don't worry. I'll be right here to catch you if you fall."

Serena took a deep breath and swung her leg around and down. Unfortunately, her left leg was still so high off the ground she couldn't get her balance, and gravity took over, dropping her squarely into Marc's waiting arms. Laughing, he pulled her up and kissed her soundly. When she came up for air, Tony was there to take his place. Breathless, she was leaning in to deepen the kiss when she heard the sound of voices and laughter.

Tony steadied her on her feet with both hands and then turned to see who was coming down the trail. When the riders came into view, he cursed under his breath.

"Who is it?" Serena asked. She couldn't see over the horses.

"It's Kaylee, and she's with Warren and Kyle." Tony's eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring as he watched the approaching riders. At her puzzled look, he explained. "They're the other hands on the ranch." He gazed back at the threesome. "And they're not supposed to be goofing off with a sixteen-year-old girl."

As they came into view, Serena got a good look at the foreman's young daughter. She'd dressed in a bathing suit and pulled a pair of jeans over it for riding. Her hair was flowing loose around her shoulders, and there was no doubt she looked older than her sixteen years. Both men were entirely too old to be spending time with the young girl.

"What the hell are you up to, Kaylee?" Tony shouted.

"Don't get your dander up. I'm just going for a little mid-day swim."

"And you two just thought you'd join her?" Tony asked.

"Hey, Rena. You're looking better. Have you met Warren and Kyle?" Kaylee jumped off her horse and walked over to Rena's side. "The blond is Kyle, and the yummy brunette is Warren. They're the full-time hands on the ranch." Both men tipped their hats.

Marc walked up and leveled a stern gaze on Kaylee. "You're not to be swimming without your dad or someone your dad approves of, and you know it, young lady."

"Daddy approves of Warren and Kyle. They'd never let anything happen to me."

"Warren and Kyle are paid to work this ranch, not to keep you entertained." Marc took her by the arm and led her back to her horse. "You get your butt on home, and tell your dad what you've been up to."

"Marc," she wailed.

"I mean it, little girl. I'm gonna be talking to him myself later, so you better do it before I do." He smacked the hind quarter on her horse. "I'll see you later." In a huff, the young girl rode off.

Tony turned to the two men still on their horses. "We'll talk to you about this later. You men have plenty of work to keep you busy. Since you're here, I want you to take our horses back to the corral at the cabin. We're gonna take Rena back in the truck. Brush 'em down and give 'em some feed, and then report back to the main barn and check in with Jeremy.

"Right away, boss." Warren moved forward and took the reins of the three horses from Marc. He handed one to Kyle, and they began leading the horses down the trail toward the cabin.

"I don't want you guys to lose your jobs." She could just imagine what Warren and Kyle would tell the foreman when they got back to the ranch.

"We're not in any danger of losing our jobs. Why would you even say that?" Marc asked.

"Hello? We just got caught goofing off. You're out here wasting time with me that you could be out working on the ranch."

Tony chuckled. "We appreciate you worrying about us, princess, but it's not necessary." He glanced at Marc. "We're on vacation."

"No! You don't want to waste your vacation babysitting me. Can't the police send somebody to watch me until they catch Eric?"

"Relax, Rena." Tony took her in his arms. "We're taking some time off without pay to do this, so we're not really wasting vacation time."

"You're losing money because of me?"

"No," Marc assured her. "The Houston PD is paying us an allowance for keeping you safe. Jeremy doesn't really need us right now, so everybody's happy."

Serena didn't understand the looks that kept passing between the two men. They were keeping something from her, and she didn't like it. "Okay, I guess. Do you mind if we head back now? I really am feeling a little stiff."

"You bet we can." Tony hugged her close and ran his hands firmly across the cheeks of her butt and squeezed.

“Ahhh, that feels great,” she groaned. Embarrassed, she pulled away. “I’ll get the picnic stuff packed up.”

Tony pulled her closer. “Marc’s already got everything packed up.”

She turned around in time to see him placing the basket in the back of the truck. “Wow, that was fast.”

Marc grinned. “Now we can get to that massage we owe you.”

“Uh, okay, I guess.” Quietly she followed Tony and let him help her into the truck. She couldn’t wait to see what the afternoon brought.

* * * *

“Go on in and take a hot shower. We’ll take one when you’re done, and then we’ll give you that massage.” Tony pushed her toward the bathroom.

“Here, Rena.” Marc handed her a robe. “Just put this on when you’re done.”

Serena looked at the silky material and felt her face flame. It wouldn’t hide very much of her body. Her hand shook as she reached out to take the dark blue robe. “Thanks,” she mumbled. Needing time to pull herself together, she walked into the bathroom and shut the door. It was all she could do to keep herself from reaching out and turning the lock. *Can I really do this?* Her body felt inflamed. Her hardened nipples rubbed painfully against the cups of her bra while her thighs became damp with her juices. *If they lay one hand on me, I’m going to go off like fireworks on the fourth of July.*

Determined to ignore her longing, she turned on the shower and stripped off her clothes. She stood letting the hot water cascade down her back, relaxing the overworked muscles. *I can do this.* Everyone in Mountain Vista believed her to be a slut, but truthfully there had only been two men she’d invited to her bed. *Well, not technically in my bed.* She’d lost her virginity at the ripe old age of sixteen. She’d met

Davey Pendergrass in her sixth period class and fallen immediately in love with his blond, California bad boy looks. On their second date, he'd made love to her in the back seat of his father's Chevy. It was not a memorable experience. Unfortunately, he'd bragged about the event, as most young men do, and her stepbrothers had learned of her fallen-woman status. She spent the next two years trying to stay out of their clutches. And, except for one unfortunate night, she'd been successful. Their punishment for not saying yes to them had been to spread rumors all around town about her. They had everyone believing she would sleep with anything that moved.

She found out about their lies when she had her second sexual experience. She met Alan Devlin in her first year at the Community College. He'd talked his way into her small apartment off campus and proceeded to seduce her in her own bed. Although the sex was more memorable, the entire experience soured when he'd admitted his part of the evening was due to a dare. When he'd asked if he could see her again, she'd promptly kneed him firmly between the legs. She'd pretty much steered clear of Mountain Vista men after that. The only men she really chased after were the Carlisle twins. *I only wanted them for security. Nobody would have dared to talk down to me if they were by my side.*

Putting thoughts of the past aside, Serena shut off the water and got out of the shower. Grabbing a towel, she dried off quickly and then brushed her shoulder length hair until it shone. Satisfied, she pulled the silky robe on and tied it around her waist. Giggling, she rolled up the sleeves and wondered which of the large men it belonged to.

"There's our pretty lady." Marc smiled when Serena came out of the bathroom. "Just go in and lie down on the bed, honey. We're gonna jump in the shower and clean up real quick, and then we'll be out to take care of you."

Tony gave her a wink as the two men went in to the bathroom. Nervously, she went into the bedroom and lay down on the bed. She'd

never felt more tense and more excited at the same time. The anticipation of what might happen literally took her breath away. It seemed like only a few minutes before she heard the bathroom door opening. Nervous energy had her leaping to her feet to meet them halfway across the room.

“Going somewhere, princess?” Tony asked. Both men were naked except for the towels draped around their waists. He walked over and took her in his arms. Bending, he brushed his mouth lightly against hers before pressing his tongue against her mouth. Gently he took her bottom lip between his teeth.

Marc pressed up against her back and let his face close in on her neck. “You smell good,” he whispered. “I don’t think we’ll ever get enough of you.”

Wicked, sensual thoughts fluttered through her mind when she felt his tongue flick against the skin of her neck. Her hands slid up Tony’s smooth chest to grip tightly on his shoulders. He released her mouth and pulled Serena’s head down to his chest while Marc rubbed her back in long, seductive strokes. Tony pulled her fingers away and kissed the tip of each one before he let her robe fall from her shoulders. The silk’s slow glide to the floor caressed her skin with the softest touch as a blush crept over her.

Marc’s hands ran up her torso to the outside of her breasts as he leaned closer, his chest hair tickling the skin of her back. Her hands timidly reached out and loosened the towel around Tony’s hips, unveiling the beauty of his masculine form. His cock, long and thick, jutted up toward his navel with just a glitter of moisture decorating the tip. His hands captured her taut nipples and rolled the tips, eliciting a groan from deep in her throat.

“I think she likes that, Marc.” Tony smiled as he flicked his thumbs back and forth across her sensitive nipples.

“Turn her around,” Marc demanded. His hands gripped her shoulders and turned her quickly, pulling her hard against his aroused

cock. She lifted her hands to his chest and skated her palms upward through the dark, springy hair.

Her head fell back when she felt Tony suck her earlobe between his lips, nipping it lightly with his teeth while he ground his erection against her ass.

“Let’s move this to a soft surface,” Marc crooned. The men took her by the hands and led her to the bed. He turned to the dresser and came back with a bottle of oil in his hands. He winked at her. “This is edible. Get in the center of the bed and lay down.”

“No, I’ve got a better idea.” Tony moved onto the bed. “Come on, princess. I want you to lie on top of me.”

“Oh, yeah. Perfect,” Marc drawled. When she didn’t move right away, Marc kissed her softly. “It’s all right, sunshine. We’ll take good care of you.”

Serena almost snorted. She wasn’t worried about them taking care of her, just the opposite. How disappointed were they going to be when they found out everything she knew came from books and not hands-on experience? She started to climb on top of Tony and then yelped when he reached and plucked her off the bed and settled her on top of his warm, aroused body. Before she could muster her thoughts, he pulled her closer and murmured her name against her mouth. He skimmed the tip of his tongue across the seam of her lips before slipping it inside mingling their flavors together.

On her other side, Marc was toying with her hair, his body close to hers. Sandwiched between them, she could feel his thick cock nestled against her ass as he pressed a kiss into her nape. He lifted his head, slipping his hands along her shoulders and down to her waist. “This might be a little cold, baby.”

Serena squealed and glared at him over her shoulder as the cold oil dripped down her back. “That wasn’t very nice.”

He just grinned as he worked in the fragrant liquid, relaxing her muscles. Once the oil evenly coated her back, he turned it into a

sensual massage, his hands sliding down, rubbing and kneading the area from her shoulders down to her ass.

Serena started when Tony ran a shaking hand over her from her shoulder to her hip and then up again, cupping one breast. “You’re so damn beautiful,” he whispered reverently. Instinctively, she rubbed herself against his cock, which had grown even harder between them as he caressed the hardening tip of her nipple against his palm. He bowed his head to one breast and laved the nipple hungrily with his tongue while kneading the other one between his fingertips. Latching onto one hard nipple, he suckled, tugging hard enough to send sharp spasms to her throbbing clit. He raised his head from his feast on her breasts and grinned at her wickedly. She felt a light smack on her ass and before she could voice a complaint, Tony stilled her with a kiss, his tongue exploring her mouth, finding all the sensitive spots.

“I want to watch you suck him while I’m inside you.” Marc’s words tickled the hairs against the back of her neck. He caught her hips, urging her to rise up.

Tony threaded his hands through her hair and drew her closer to his cock. “Touch me,” he whispered harshly.

Remembering every erotic book she’d ever read, Serena opened her mouth over him, sucking the head of his cock and then running her tongue around the sensitive ridge at its base. She raked her nails down his thighs, her teeth along his shaft.

“Careful, princess,” he cautioned. “Watch those teeth, pretty lady.”

She looked up and grinned before tentatively running her fingers along the velvety length to the tip that glistened with a drop of pre-cum. Pulling her courage together, she ran her tongue down into the slit to tease him, surprised at the salty, musky taste. She swirled her tongue around the tip and then opened her mouth to take as much of his length as she could handle. As she pulled back, she gripped her fingers around the hard shaft and swirled her tongue around and around.

“God, yes, that’s it, baby. You’re doing great.” Tony’s words seemed almost incoherent as she pleased him.

Grasping his cock tighter, she licked and stroked it from root to tip, feeling it harden more and buck against her hands. At the same time, she felt Marc’s hands brush the inside of her thighs.

“I want to make you scream our names when you come.” His hand drifted up her thigh and found its way to her naked pussy. “I can smell the cream pooling between your legs, sunshine.” He found her heat and dipped inside. Using his fingers, he spread open her labia and pushed back the hood covering her center. Slowly he began rubbing a tight circle around her exposed clit and then pushed a finger inside her core.

Serena felt his hands on her bare buttocks as he leaned forward, and she tensed with the feel of his hot breath against her pussy.

“Slow down, princess.” Tony pulled back slightly from her mouth. “I want us to all come together.”

Thankful, she slowed her caresses and concentrated on Marc’s love play. She felt a fresh flood of cream drench her pussy when Marc’s mouth touched her slit. Tony’s hands skimmed down her back and then to her ass, cupping the soft mounds. Marc circled her clit with his tongue once and then flicked it before sucking it into his mouth.

“I’m gonna feast on all this heavenly cream,” he cried. Extending his tongue, he lapped slowly before drilling deep inside. He explored her folds with his tongue and fingers, taking her to the brink of orgasm and then pulling back.

“No, don’t stop,” she begged.

“Don’t worry, sunshine. I won’t leave you like this.” He glanced up at Tony. “She’s so damn tight I can feel her inner muscles clenching around my fingers.”

Her breaths came in shallow pants as Marc prowled up her body. He licked his way from her ass to her shoulder. She could feel his erection nudging against her opening.

“Are you ready for me, Rena?”

She could only nod as she sucked lightly on the head of Tony’s cock.

“Here we go, baby.” Placing his knees between her parted thighs he covered her body with his. Hands stroked down her back, cupping her ass and separating the cheeks just enough to slide his shaft between them.

Serena froze. “Wait, what are you doing?” She clenched her ass tight as he brushed over her delicate sphincter.

“Relax, sunshine. I’m just playing around. We’re not taking your ass tonight.” He positioned himself and sank into her pussy with one thrust, groaning in delight. “God, she’s like liquid fire.” He adjusted his angle and thrust upward, letting his cock grind against her clit.

Serena squeezed Marc’s shaft with her strong inner muscles and took as much of Tony into her mouth as she could. Tony began to move his cock in and out of her mouth, matching the rhythm that Marc set as he pumped his cock into her harder and faster.

Tony pumped his hips while she sucked on his cock. “Oh, man. I can feel my balls tightening. Princess, if you don’t want a mouthful, you better pull back now.”

Serena only had to think for one second before she made her decision and renewed her efforts.

“Come for her. Let her taste you,” Marc urged as he pumped away.

Tony’s head fell back onto the pillow, and a guttural moan left his throat as he came, warm, thick fluid filling her mouth. Marc reached underneath her hips and flicked her clit. The orgasm tore through her body like an explosion and she screamed.

“That’s it, baby,” Marc yelled. He dragged his fingernails down her back, his body shaking as he came, his grunts echoing through the cabin.

Serena relaxed against Tony’s body and then suddenly froze.

“What’s wrong, princess?” Tony asked.

“Oh, God, we forgot.”

“Forgot what?” Marc asked sleepily.

“Condoms, we forgot to use condoms.” Her voice was slightly hysterical.

“Oh, sunshine, I’d never do that to you.” He pulled out of her body and lay beside her on the bed. “Look, darlin’. You were too busy sucking on Tony to know when I put it on.”

She glanced down and felt immediate relief at the sight of his rubber-enclosed softening erection.

He took her chin and raised her gaze to his. “We’d never endanger you, love. Both of us are clean, and we’re tested regularly. We’ve been in a monogamous relationship for over seven years.”

“I don’t understand. You brought me here.”

“But you’re the only person we’ve ever offered to share our bed with.”

“I, um...” Serena didn’t know what to say.

Tony rolled over and placed her between them on the bed. “Don’t say anything right now, princess. It’s been a busy afternoon. Let’s all take a little nap, and then we’ll fix some dinner.”

Marc kissed her on the nose. “I’ll be right back. I’m just gonna get rid of this and wash up.”

Serena watched him walk away and felt Tony snuggle up to her back. *What am I going to do now? I actually feel something for these guys.* Letting herself relax, she was asleep before Marc came back to the bed.

Chapter 8

Marc snuggled closer to a warm, muscular wall of skin and rubbed his morning erection back and forth across Tony's smooth buttocks.

"Man, what is that heavenly smell?" Tony asked, his voice still heavy with sleep.

Marc opened his eyes and glanced at the other side of the bed. "Where the hell's Rena?" Before he could say anything else, a delectable smell enveloped his senses. "Oh, my God. Is she cooking?" His head raised, his nostrils flaring. "Ambrosia! Did you know she could cook?"

Tony snorted. "Hell, she hardly ever eats. Why would I think she could cook?"

Laughing, Marc slapped his partner on the ass. "Let's go find out what our woman is up to." Without waiting for a response, he jumped from the bed and started for the door.

"Wait for me, damn it." Tony got up and walked over to the chest and pulled open a drawer. "Here," he said, tossing a pair of shorts toward Marc. "Let's at least try and act a little civilized."

"It ain't like she hasn't already seen everything we've got," Marc grumbled as he pulled on the shorts.

"Yeah, but she might not want it staring her in the eye while she eats." Smiling, he walked over and placed a gentle kiss on Marc's lips. "Come on, lover. Let's go see what's cooking." He grabbed Marc's arm before he could move forward. "Remember to be tactful, okay?"

"What the hell are you talking about now?"

Tony sighed. "Look, she's probably not Julia Child, you know? If it's bad, you can't let on. We're trying to build her self-esteem up not shoot it down."

"Geez, you don't honestly think I'd do anything to hurt her feelings, do you?"

"Well, not on purpose." He winked.

"Come on, asshole. Let's go kiss our woman good morning." Grinning, Marc opened the bedroom door and stepped into the living room with Tony close on his heels. The vision that awaited them took his breath away.

Serena stood at the stove studiously examining something in a skillet. The oversized T-shirt she wore had shifted to the side, baring one shoulder and fell to the middle of her thighs. Her long, slender legs were bare while thick socks covered her dainty feet. He could see the slight bounce of her ass cheeks as she jiggled the pan back and forth on the burner. Her blond hair hung in loose tangles around her shoulders, and visions of the silky strands draped across his thighs filled his thoughts.

Serena turned around and smiled. "Hey, sleepyheads. It's about time you got up. Breakfast is almost done."

"You cooked?" Marc didn't need Tony's foot kicking him in the shin to know he'd screwed up. The hurt that briefly shown in her eyes made him want to tear his own tongue out.

"Yeah, I figured it was the least I could do. You guys have been taking really good care of me, but it doesn't seem fair that you have to do all the work." She gave them a wide grin. "I promise not to poison you."

Marc walked over and slipped his arms around her waist and buried his face in her hair. "Sunshine, it smells delicious. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I was just surprised to see you up. It was pretty late before we let you get any sleep."

"I feel great," she assured him. She turned and grabbed two potholders before pulling two plates out of the oven. "Take a seat, guys. Everything's ready."

Marc pulled out his chair and watched her set two beautiful, golden brown omelets on the table. "Damn, that looks good, sunshine." Amazed, he watched her grab two more plates and bring them over. One held another, much smaller omelet while the other overflowed with sausage and toast. "How long have you been up?" he asked.

"A couple of hours, I guess. I didn't really look at the clock." She reached for a piece of sausage and then stopped. "Damn, wait a minute." She got up and grabbed the coffee pot and brought it back to the table. Her brow wrinkled for a moment, and then she snapped her fingers. "That's what I forgot," she mumbled. Grinning, she walked to the fridge and pulled out the bottle of mustard and brought it back to the table. With a satisfied look on her face, she proceeded to paint the top of her omelet with streaks of bright yellow.

Marc swallowed hard. "I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing you do that."

Serena grinned around a mouthful of egg, tilted her head and shrugged.

"Ummmm!" Tony groaned, savoring his breakfast with his eyes closed. "This is fantastic."

"This is the best omelet I've ever had. Where did you learn to cook?" Marc asked. The egg was fluffy and filled with bits of ham, onion, and cheese.

"From my mom, mostly. When I was little she'd let me help her in the kitchen all the time." She looked sad for a moment and then gave them a bright smile. "Later on, I spent a lot of time watching cooking shows on television." She sighed, dropping her gaze to her plate. "Believe it or not, I always imagined having a family to cook for."

Marc reached over and caressed her arm. "Why wouldn't we believe it, sunshine? Isn't that every little girl's dream?"

“When they’re young, maybe.” She gave a nervous little laugh. “Let’s face it, guys. I’m not exactly the Suzy Homemaker type.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tony, drawled. “You seem pretty down-to-earth to me.” He wrinkled his nose. “Except for that Grey Poupon fetish you have.”

Serena was quiet for a moment and then burst out laughing. A knock at the door had her dropping her fork and jumping to her feet.

Marc swore silently as he stood and pulled her into his arms. *Shit, she’s terrified. She’s still expecting Abernathy to find her and finish what he started.* “Relax, Rena. Abernathy doesn’t have a clue where you are.”

Tony got up and walked toward the door. “He’s right, princess. Nobody that’s out to get you is just gonna knock on the door.”

Marc felt Serena relax in his arms when Tony opened the door to find Kaylee on the other side. She carried a large cardboard box and had a huge smile on her face.

“Hey, everybody.” She looked up at Tony. “Dad sent me to ask if you’d come down to the main barn for just a bit. He sent me to keep Rena company while you’re gone.” She glanced over at Marc. “He said to tell you he wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

Marc felt Serena tug against his arms. When he loosened his hold, she stepped back and began clearing the table. He turned his attention back to Kaylee. “What’s in the box, short stuff?”

Kaylee’s smile widened. “A DVD player and movies.”

Serena barked out a laugh. “A lot of good that’ll do. These Neanderthals don’t even own a television.”

“They do now,” Kaylee said with a smirk. “Dad sent a portable one along with me. It’s in the truck.”

Serena turned her gaze to Tony. “Well, don’t just stand there. Go get the sucker.” She cleared a large flat place on the table. “Bring the box over here, Kaylee, and let’s see what you got.”

"I'll get dressed while you bring it in, Tony. Then I'll hook it all up while you get ready." Marc headed for the bedroom and stopped when he heard Serena squeal.

"This is my all-time favorite movie, girl."

Curious, Marc tried to see the box she held tightly to her chest. "What is it?" he asked.

"Just the most romantic story ever told." She held up the box. "*An Officer and a Gentleman*."

Marc snorted. "You've got to be kidding me?" He took a step back and held up his hands in surrender when he saw the narrowing of her eyes. "I'm sure it's great."

"Are you telling me you've never seen this movie?" Serena asked.

"Can't honestly say I have. Tony and I aren't much into movies or television."

"Well, we're just going to have to fix that." She looked over at Kaylee. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yeah, I ate a couple of hours ago with Dad."

"Okay, then I'm gonna do these dishes up really quick and then get dressed while the guys get things set up."

"You go ahead and get dressed, Rena. I'll do these dishes up for you," Kaylee offered.

Serena watched her for a moment and then smiled as she nodded. "Okay, I won't be long." She grinned at Marc as she passed him on the way to the bedroom. "Don't worry, cowboy. I've already had my shower, so the bathroom's all yours."

* * * *

Serena handed Kaylee a glass of tea before joining her on the couch. Marc and Tony were at their meeting, and the two girls were watching the movie and talking at the same time. Kaylee's constant chatter about the two ranch hands had begun to worry Serena. "Does

your dad approve of you spending so much time with Warren and Kyle?" she asked.

Kaylee crossed her arms across her chest and glanced around toward the door. "He's fine with it." She wouldn't meet Serena's gaze. "He's always liked them, and I know he trusts them."

Serena didn't want to push, but she couldn't stop from asking questions. "Don't you think they're a little old for you? They have to be in their twenties."

Kaylee gave her a sheepish grin and shrugged. "Nah, they're not too old. Besides, it's not like I'm planning on settling down with 'em or anything. They're just fun to flirt with. They make me feel special and kind of pretty. You know?"

Serena knew better than most just how a young girl's head could be turned. "Do you have boyfriends back home at your mom's house?"

Kaylee scowled, her body tensing, nostrils flaring. "No, my mother doesn't think I'm old enough to date." She gave a brittle, little laugh. "Kind of ironic when I know she was only two years older than I am now when she had me." There was no mistaking the bitter edge to her voice.

"Maybe that's why she wants you to wait," Serena said quietly.

"She doesn't understand, Rena. I'm not like she was. I'd never go all the way with some boy like she did." A dull, pink flush began spreading up her cheeks. "I just like the way Warren and Kyle make me feel."

"Look, Kaylee—" She stopped and turned toward the door when it opened.

"Oh, man, that movie's still playing." Tony let out an exaggerated groan.

Serena watched Kaylee wipe her hand across her eyes as she turned away from the door.

“Kaylee, your dad said to send you his way. He’s got some errands to run, and he needs the truck.” Marc ruffled her hair as he walked by and then settled on the couch beside Serena.

“Do you need to take the television and all these movies back?” Serena asked.

“No, Dad said to tell you they’re a gift.” She snickered. “He said by now you were probably ready to pull your hair out putting up with these two.” Laughing, she dodged the pillow Marc threw at her head and sprinted toward the door. “I’ll see you later, Rena.” She was gone before Serena could respond.

“Did you have a nice visit?” Tony asked as he came and joined her on the couch.

“Yeah, it was great. She’s a sweet kid.”

“I think your movie’s about over, princess.” Tony nuzzled the side of her neck.

Serena suppressed a moan and glanced toward the television. “Wait,” she cried, pushing at his chest.

“What’s wrong?” Marc asked.

“Look!” She pointed toward the screen and grinned. “It’s my favorite part.” She watched Richard Gere walk purposefully through the factory until he found Debra Winger. “Look at that kiss.” Serena sighed. “And now he’ll whisk her off her feet and carry her off to a new life.” She glanced at Marc, and then over to Tony. She had to stifle her laugh when she saw the disgusted looks on their faces. “Now watch. He’s going to set that hat on her head just like he’s staking his claim.”

“You wanna watch him stake his claim, or would you rather come play with us?” Marc asked.

Marc crooked his finger urging her closer and then wrapped his arms around her. Serena shuddered as desire ran through her. He cupped the back of her head and threaded his fingers through her long hair tilting her head for a kiss. His tongue delved deep, rubbing sensuously, possessively, along the tender inner walls of her mouth.

Suddenly, without warning, he broke away from the kiss and stood. He bent and lifted her in his hard arms and turned toward the bedroom. Serena wrapped her arms around his neck and brought her legs up to grip around his waist.

Marc glanced back at Tony. "You coming with us, or are you planning on rewinding that movie?"

"Oh, I'm coming. Hopefully more than once." He clicked off the television and got to his feet. Serena giggled when he walked up and licked the back of Marc's ear. "And just for the record, asshole," he whispered. "You don't rewind DVDs."

Serena laughed out loud and held tightly to Marc as he carried her to the bed. Her laughter turned to a shriek when he dropped her unceremoniously onto the mattress. She lay back against the pillows as he covered her with his body, sheltering her with his warmth. She felt Tony climb into the bed and lay down beside her as Marc framed her face with his lean hands and slowly bent toward her parting lips.

"Turn on your side," Tony demanded.

Deepening the kiss, Marc ran his hand down her side to her butt and pulled her closer right before rolling them both to their sides. Immediately, she felt Tony move behind her. His hands ran over her back and around to her belly. She groaned and backed into him when his breath tickled her neck, and she jumped at the sensation of being caught between the two men.

Tony's tongue snaked into her ear at the same time hers tangled with Marc's, and she became more demanding. Her mouth felt consumed as he hungrily slanted his lips over hers.

"Wait," Tony cried out raggedly. "Let's get these clothes off."

Serena felt bereft when both men pulled away and stood to shuck off their clothes. Not wanting to delay things, she quickly slid out of her own garments and threw them onto the floor beside the bed.

Marc returned to the bed first and crushed her to him, pressing his hardness against her. She delighted in the feel of her breasts against his hair-roughened chest. He cupped Serena's face in his hands and

nipped her bottom lip before closing his mouth over hers. She felt consumed by his kiss. Marc moved his hands up to cup her breasts as Tony took her earlobe between his teeth and gave it a small tug. He nibbled briefly at her neck and then worked his way down her back as she squirmed in pleasure.

Serena pressed closer to Marc, rubbing her taut nipples against his chest. He broke their kiss to reach out and touch one erect, pink bud, rolling it carefully between his fingers while Tony ran his hands over her shoulders. She melted with a sigh when one large, strong hand closed gently around her breast. Marc took her lips in a heated, demanding kiss that left her breathless.

She felt Tony pull away, and then hands on her shoulders rolled her to her back. Marc pinched her right nipple and then teased it with his thumb while Tony plucked gently and rhythmically at the left one. Her entire body shivered in response when Tony's mouth fastened on her breast, teasing the sensitive bud of tight flesh. Then he pulled away to gaze into her eyes. Her thoughts cut off with the first touch of his lips, soft and warm and strong. They brushed hers once, twice, and then settled, capturing her mouth in a hot kiss, his tongue swirling against hers.

Tony trailed kisses along her cheek to her ear and then down her neck. She ran her hand over his shoulder and down, dragging her nails along his back. Her fingers splayed over his naked skin as she steered her fingers over the swirl of muscle that crisscrossed his back.

Marc's tongue dipped into her navel as he brushed his knuckle against the inside of her thigh. She instinctively spread her legs wider to give him better access when Tony's hand dropped to search between her legs. She grew wet with desire when he touched the tip of his finger to her clit. She rocked her hips against his hand and then froze in amazement when the two men met in a carnal kiss over the top of her body. She'd never seen two men kiss, and she found it exciting. She reached down and began rubbing her clit as their tongues dueled in an erotic dance.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Marc said in a husky voice. He grabbed her hand and pressed it down onto the mattress. “That’s our job.” He pinched her erect nipple between his thumb and forefinger, plucking at it almost lazily. “Tony, why don’t you give our little lady here some close-up and personal attention?”

Tony lifted his head, his eyes almost black as they searched her face. Slowly he moved and knelt in between her spread thighs. He rubbed across her clit with his index finger, holding her gaze with his own. “She’s drenched down here,” he whispered. “You like this, don’t you, princess?”

She felt herself pushed higher and higher as his fingers closed over the throbbing center of her sex. Marc cupped her cheek and ran his thumb over her lips and then bent and drew her bottom lip between his teeth. She could feel her hardened nipples rub against his chest as he leaned close. His hand slid down to pinch and tug the rigid tip of her breast.

Serena felt her inner muscles tighten when Tony slipped a finger between her folds, teasing the bundle of nerves hidden at the top of her slit. A fiery sensation whipped through her, and she cried out as she came around his fingers.

“God, she’s so responsive, Marc.” Tony slid down in the bed and began to lick her leg slowly from her ankle to the inside of her knee. “I wanna taste every inch of this luscious body.”

“Go for it,” Marc said huskily. “And then it’s my turn.”

Catching her legs with his hands, Tony parted them even farther and covered her mound with his mouth. He grabbed Marc’s hand and guided it between her legs.

“Man, she’s got cream flowing from her pussy sliding straight down toward her ass.” Marc slid two fingers easily into her slick channel.

“Maybe we won’t need any lube to take her ass,” Tony said.

Serena froze, her pleasure waning at his words.

“What’s wrong, princess?” Tony raised his passion-filled eyes to her. “We won’t do anything you don’t want. If you’re not ready, then we won’t push you.” He smiled at her tenderly, and she felt herself relax.

A whimper of pleasure escaped when she felt his tongue probing her folds and slipping inside. She moaned loudly as Marc continued to pump his fingers in and out of her pussy, and Tony clamped his lips over her clit.

“She’s delicious,” Tony mumbled and went right back to sucking and licking. Without warning, a second orgasm burst over her, a kaleidoscope of colors flashing behind her closed eyes. Tony continued to lick her through her aftershocks, and then Marc raised his lips up to her ear.

“Touch me, sunshine. I need to feel your hand,” he whispered.

Serena was hesitant at first and then slowly stretched her hand toward his legs. She reached between them and allowed her fingers to close around his erection.

“Stroke me,” he whispered, guiding her hand up and down on his rod.

She inhaled deeply, filling her senses with his masculine scent. When she glanced at Tony she found his eyes glued to her hand on his lover’s shaft. With a firm grip on his cock, Serena leaned in and stroked her tongue along Marc’s full length.

“Holy shit,” Marc cried and pushed her to her back on the bed. He raked his eyes over Tony. “Hand me a condom and get the lube.”

“What?” Serena cried.

“Not to worry, love. It’s for Tony.” He took the small piece of rubber and rolled it over his cock. “I can’t wait any longer, man. I’m gonna fuck her pussy while you fuck me.” He raised a hand to Tony’s cheek. “Is that okay with you?” For an answer Tony grinned and squirted a large portion from the tube onto his fingers.

Marc moved to kneel between Serena’s legs. His covered cock slipped between her spread thighs and probed the entrance to her

body. Holding her in place with his hands, he rammed into her, thrusting deep. Serena gasped, her entire body shuddering beneath him.

“Hold still now, Marc.” Tony moved directly behind Marc and lowered his hand out of Serena’s sight. She saw Marc’s eyes go wide and then close sensuously as a guttural sound came from deep within his throat.

“I’m coming in, lover.” Tony rested his hands on Marc’s waist and pushed his hips forward, causing Marc to push deeper into Serena. All three of them groaned harshly.

In one swift movement, Marc pulled almost completely from her body and then pushed back in and began gliding in and out with urgent strokes. She could feel the ease in which he slid in deep, her channel wet and welcoming as he stretched her walls. His eyes closed, and, panting, he thrust upward.

Serena wrapped her legs around his waist and ground her wet pussy against his hard shaft. None of them would last long at this rate. She could see Tony’s face, his eyes shut tightly as he strained toward a release. Marc withdrew and then thrust deeply, roughly, into her over and over again until she came in a screaming frenzy, stealing her ability to breathe. Several more thrusts and Marc shook and then stiffened as he came. She could feel his cock jerking intimately inside her.

Tony yelled out, his body practically convulsing in pleasure as his own orgasm overtook him. For several minutes nobody moved or said anything, and then Tony slowly pulled away from Marc and got off the bed. He headed toward the bathroom as Marc slowly slid backwards and collapsed beside her on the mattress.

Serena heard water running and then watched Tony as he came back to the bed with a couple of washrags in his hand.

“Roll over, lover.” He pressed a hand on Marc’s shoulder and pushed him onto his back. Smiling at Serena, he reached over and carefully pulled off Marc’s condom. He deftly tied the end and tossed

it into the trashcan beside the bed before handing Marc one of the rags. Then he grinned wickedly and walked around the bed and climbed in beside Serena.

She screeched when he used the other rag to clean between her legs. “Knock it off. It’s cold,” she complained.

“Sorry, princess.” He threw the rag to the floor and pulled her close. She snuggled into his warm embrace and then smiled when she felt Marc’s heat against her back.

“That was fantastic, sunshine.” Marc rubbed his hand firmly up and down her back.

“Better than fantastic, love.” She felt Tony’s lips against her forehead.

Serena didn’t know what to say. They made her feel like she belonged. She felt loved and wanted, and it scared her.

“Jeremy reminded us about the Autumn Festival dance that’s coming up.” Marc nuzzled her behind the ear. “We sure would be happy if you’d agree to go with us.”

“When is it?” she asked.

“It’s a week from Saturday,” Marc said.

“You’d love it, princess.” Tony threw a leg across her thigh. “There’s live music, dancing and plenty of beer and pop.”

“A week from Saturday is a long way off.”

Marc let his hand slide across her butt. “It’s not that far, and besides, we have to get tickets if you’re agreeable.” He kissed her shoulder. “Kaylee and Jeremy will be there.”

“Marc, I don’t have any clothes with me that would work for a dance.”

“This is a country dance, sunshine. Those new jeans and western shirts we bought will be just fine for a little line dancing.” Tony bit lightly against her earlobe.

Serena sighed and tried to hide her smile. They were really laying it on thick, trying to get her to agree. “Okay, I guess.” She looked up into Marc’s eyes. “I mean, as long as I’m still here. They could catch

Eric any day now, and then I'd be gone." Marc gave Tony a look she couldn't understand.

"Well, let's not worry about that," Marc mumbled.

"I'll pick up the tickets tomorrow and get us a reserved table." Tony kissed her lightly on the lips. "Let's get some sleep now, princess. Tomorrow's gonna be a long day."

"What's going to be so long about it?" she asked.

Marc pulled her head around and pressed a kiss against her lips. "We're gonna teach you to saddle Clyde and take you riding again."

"Oh, shit," Serena whispered. She watched as Marc chuckled and then closed his eyes. She thought back to the strange looks they'd exchanged. Every time she'd mentioned Eric's name, they'd had the same guilty look. *What are they hiding?*

Chapter 9

“So, what do you think?” Marc asked Tony.

Tony’s brows drew together when he frowned. “About?”

Marc sighed impatiently. “How do you think things are going with Rena?” For the last ten days, they’d spent every moment finding new ways to woo their reluctant houseguest.

Tony snorted. “You tell me. I swear, I’ve never known a woman to be so confusing. Some days she acts like we’re the best thing since sliced bread, and others you could freeze water into ice with her cold demeanor.”

“Any ideas how we can bring a little warmth to those icy days?”

“Hell, no. This seduction shit was all your idea, cowboy. I’m a follower, not an idea man.”

Before Marc could respond his cell phone rang. “Marcus Weller,” he growled.

“Marc, I’m glad I finally got through to you. Don’t you ever listen to your messages?”

Marc swore silently. “Hello, John, what can I do you for?” He looked over at Tony and whispered. “It’s John Millerson.”

“Man, I need you to produce Ms. Dammler. I can’t keep covering for you guys. I’ve got half a dozen different people demanding to know where she is.” His sigh came through loud and clear over the phone line. “The DA in Oregon needs her to return and give another statement. Eric’s lawyer is trying to save face for his client and pretty much placing the blame for this whole episode on Ms. Dammler. Hell, if that’s not bad enough, her father’s helping his case by telling stories of her misspent youth.”

“That’s a crock of shit, John. No respectable court of law will rule that anything she did justified getting the crap beat of her. Hell, dear old daddy was causing trouble for her before we even left Mountain Vista.” He glared at Tony and shook his head. “Besides, we need a little more time.”

“Time for what, Marc?” John asked.

Marc hesitated and then decided not to answer the question. “Just give us two more weeks, John. That’s all we’re asking.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. “All right, for the sake of our long-standing friendship I’ll give you two more weeks. But I’m going to want a full explanation when all this is over.”

“I promise I’ll tell you everything, man.”

“Understand me, Marc. You’ve got two weeks and not one day more. If she’s not back in Mountain Vista by then, I’ll tell everyone where she is. Hell, I’ll draw them a damn map if I have to. Are we clear?”

Marc sighed. “Yeah, we’re clear.”

“Okay, then take care of yourself, and give my best to Tony.” John hung up without waiting for a reply.

Marc snapped the phone closed and tossed it on the kitchen counter.

“I take it that didn’t go well?” Tony asked.

“We’ve got two weeks to get her to come around, and then we have to have her back in Mountain Vista.” He spent a few minutes telling Tony everything John had told him.

“Christ, who the hell’s the attorney for Abernathy?” Tony growled out his words as he dropped down onto the sofa.

“I don’t know, but he can’t be too bright if he thinks he can turn this around and blame Rena for that asshole’s parole violation and assault.”

“We’re gonna have to level with her, Marc,” Tony said quietly.

“Do you have any idea what kind of shit that’s gonna drop us in?” Marc asked.

“Yeah, I do. She’s gonna go ballistic when she finds out we lied about Abernathy still being on the loose.”

Marc released a harsh laugh. “I’m not worried about her finding out about Abernathy. I’m pretty sure she’s gonna be thinking up different ways to castrate us when she finds out we own this place.”

“We need to—” Tony turned toward the bedroom door when it opened. A huge grin replaced his frown when Serena stepped into the room.

Marc allowed his gaze to slowly travel over her. She was dressed in skintight, boot-cut jeans with a rose-colored western shirt that snapped up the front. Her body had filled out over the last couple of weeks. She’d finally started eating regular meals. Several snaps at the top were open, leaving just a hint of cleavage showing. She’d styled her honey-toned blond hair into a fancy braid that kept it off her shoulders and away from her face.

“Check it out, Marc.” Tony nodded toward Serena’s feet.

Marc glanced down and grinned.

Serena looked down, a cute pout evident on her lips. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You’re just not quite dressed appropriately, sunshine.” Marc walked over to the fireplace and grabbed a box off the mantle. “These are for you, Rena.” He glanced at Tony. “We got ‘em so you wouldn’t feel out of place tonight.”

Serena took the box and sat down on the couch. Cautiously she pulled off the top. “You bought me cowboy boots?” she asked, almost choking on her words.

“No, princess, we bought you *cowgirl* boots.” Tony gave her a wicked grin.

“I can’t wear these,” she complained.

“Why not, sunshine?” Marc sat down beside her.

“Well, they’re hard, and, well, really hard. The sides are stiff, and just look at those pointed ends. They’ll squish my toes.”

Marc had to stifle a laugh. "Tell you what, Rena. Let's make a deal. You put 'em on now and give it a try. We can put your sneakers in the truck, and you'll have them to change into if the boots get too uncomfortable. Is that okay?"

She sighed and wrinkled her nose. "I guess." She pulled off her canvas shoe and slipped her foot inside the boot. With both hands she pulled on the side and grunted. "Holy crap! I'm never going to get my big foot down in this little boot."

Tony laughed and then covered his mouth with his hand. "Sorry, princess. You need to stand up and use your body weight to press your foot down inside."

"Geez, that'll cut off my circulation."

"Will you trust us, please?" Marc begged.

Serena bit her lip and stood, her posture stiff and unyielding. Slowly, she placed her foot into the boot and pushed down with her full weight. She let out a little squeak when her foot plunged past the narrow opening and lodged firmly inside the boot. "Oh, my God, it fits."

Marc shook his head and handed her the other boot. "I told you it would. Here's the other one." He watched as she repeated the procedure. "Well, what do you think?" he asked.

She walked around the room twice before a huge grin spread across her face. "They're really great. They kind of feel like they're hugging my feet in a constant massage."

Tony laughed and got to his feet. "Well, you look great, princess. Like a real western cowgirl." He nodded toward the door. "We about ready to hit the road?"

Serena grinned and stomped both her feet once. "Let's do it, cowboys."

* * * *

“Welcome to Gun Barrel City.” Serena read the sign as they drove slowly down the main drag. “With a name like that, there’s got to be a story.”

Tony put his arm around her shoulders and drew her up against the warmth of his side. “The place got its name during the late twenties and early thirties. From what I’ve heard, a lot of outlaws frequented the area during that time.”

Marc laughed. “Yeah, this little town was considered to be pretty safe during prohibition because Bonnie and Clyde hung out around here.”

Tony played with the braid hanging against Serena’s neck. “A man by the name of C.L. Waite lived in a house along the main road here. He’d sit day and night with a shotgun sticking out of his window and take potshots at any unwelcome visitors. It didn’t take long for word to spread that this was a place to stay away from.”

“We’re gonna have to bring you back here for dinner soon, sunshine.” Marc winked over at Tony.

“Oh, yeah,” Tony groaned. “La Hacienda has the best beef tamales in Texas.”

She giggled. “You guys could eat enough for ten men. What else is there around here besides food?”

Marc let go of the steering wheel and gripped her knee. “We’re just a hop, skip and a jump from the Cedar Creek Reservoir. That’s got to be the best place in the world for fishing. Largemouth bass, catfish, crappie. Nothing but good eating.” He squeezed her one more time before putting his hand back on the steering wheel. “Maybe next week we can drive out and spend the day there. Maybe even take a picnic with us.”

“Maybe. We’ll have to see.” Serena didn’t know what else to say. They talked like she had all the time in the world and would be there forever. They hadn’t even mentioned Eric’s name in over a week. Every time she’d asked about the case, they’d clammed up and acted strange. *What’s really wrong is I’m happy here. I don’t think I’ve ever*

been happier. I can even picture myself living in that dinky little cabin with the two of them.

“Everything okay, princess?” Tony asked. His voice held a touch of concern she’d never experienced from anyone else.

“Yeah, everything’s great. I’m just soaking up the atmosphere.”

“Well, you can quit soaking because we’re here,” Marc announced. He turned the truck into an overflowing parking lot next to a huge building.

Serena stared up at the large structure. “It looks like a barn.” There were people walking down the sidewalk while others lingered near the door.

“It is a barn, or at least it used to be.” Marc parked and turned off the engine. “The town purchased it, and the land it’s set on, from a farmer quite a few years ago. The people here did the remodeling themselves. They use it for parties, dances, even town meetings.”

Tony got out and held his hand out to Serena. “Come on, princess. We want to show you off.”

Serena allowed him to pull her from the truck. Marc and Tony each took one of her hands and walked toward the gathering crowd. She looked around carefully at the other women and was gratified to see everyone dressed similar to her own jeans and shirt.

“Well, what do you think?” Marc pulled her to the side as soon as they stepped through the door.

“It’s big!” She had to practically yell to be heard over the music. The building was one huge room with exposed wooden beams across the ceiling. Bridles and leather goods, along with rakes and pitchforks, hung as decoration along the walls. Small, intimate tables for four circled around the outside perimeter of a huge dance floor. A small band, consisting of a keyboard, two guitars and a set of drums, entertained the lively crowd.

“Hey, look who’s here.” Tony put his hand on Serena’s shoulder and nodded toward the door.

Serena grinned as she watched Kaylee and Jeremy approach. The young girl bounced foot to foot, her eyes glittering with an inner light. In contrast, Jeremy's clenched jaw and furrowed brow gave away his apprehension. "What do you think is wrong with him?" Serena whispered in Tony's ear.

Tony shrugged and pulled Serena closer as their foreman approached. "Man, you look like you got a bee stuck in your bonnet. What's going on?"

"I got a call from Dan Keller at the Circle C. He's got a fence down, and his prize bull is taking a stroll around the county. He called and asked for some help in rounding him up." Jeremy glanced down at Kaylee. "I've been promising Kaylee we'd come to this shindig for several weeks."

Marc glanced down at Serena and then back to Jeremy. "Why don't I go help Dan and you and Kaylee stick around for the dancing?"

Jeremy shook his head. "Absolutely not. Dan and I go way back, and he'd take it as a personal insult if I blow him off." He looked down at his daughter and grimaced before returning his attention back to Marc. "Would it be imposing too much if I asked you to let Kaylee stick around here with you?"

"I think that's a great idea." Serena walked over and put her arm around the young girl. "We can have a great time together."

Marc grinned. "Absolutely! We'd love to have her spend the evening with us. We'll be happy to watch out for her and drop her off when we come home."

Jeremy breathed in deep, his frown melting into a smile. He turned his attention to his daughter. "You stick close, Kaylee. No going off by yourself or with anyone else. You stay here in the building until they're ready to leave and don't give any lip. When they say it's time to go, you say okay. Do you understand?"

"Dad," she cried. "I'm not a baby. Does this mean I can't dance with anybody?"

“No, it means you have to do all your dancing out here on the floor where these kind folks can keep an eye on you.” Jeremy turned to Marc. “I really appreciate this. If you get back before I do, just drop her off. She has a key, and she’ll be fine until I get home.”

“No problem, man. Just be careful and give me a call on my cell if you run into trouble and need help.” Marc watched as Jeremy walked toward the door and then put his arm around Serena and Kaylee. “You ladies ready to dance?”

Serena bent down so she could whisper in Kaylee’s ear. “I don’t know how to dance.”

Kaylee’s eyes got big as saucers. “Really? Not even a simple two-step?”

“Nada,” Serena confessed.

Kaylee looked up at Tony. “We have to teach her to dance.”

Tony grinned and motioned for them to follow him. He led the way down the left side of the room to an outside door. “Okay, this is going to be a fast lesson in country dancing, princess.”

Serena’s head jerked up, her gaze meeting his. “You mean out here in the parking lot?”

“Sure, why not? The less people around, the easier it will be.” He looked over at Marc. “What do you think?”

“This is perfect.” Marc took Serena’s arm. “You can dance to just about any music here tonight if you can just master two dance steps. Do you know what they are, Kaylee?”

Kaylee grinned and moved forward to stand beside Serena. “You bet I do. It’s easy, Rena. This one’s called the brush kick. You just let your foot kick forward, gently brushing the floor at your side. You use a single, clean motion.” She demonstrated the step several times to the beat of the music seeping through the door. “See, now you try it.”

Serena duplicated the moves several times to the encouragement of her two men. “This is not so hard.”

After a couple of minutes, Tony put a hand on her arm. “The other step is called the grapevine. It’s a little more involved but still pretty simple.” He winked at Kaylee. “Little darlin’, you demonstrate while I explain. You stand with your feet together. With your right foot, make your first step to the right. Then you step to the right using your left foot letting it cross behind your right foot. You just repeat this to the correct number of steps the others are doing.”

“That’s called a grapevine right. To do a grapevine left, you just reverse everything.” Kaylee showed off her rhythm with her dance technique.

“You think you got it?” asked Tony.

Serena groaned. “No, but it’s as good as it’s going to get standing in the parking lot.” She swallowed hard and headed toward the door. “Let’s give it a test run.”

“All right! They’re playing my song.” Tony grabbed Serena’s arm and pulled her out onto the floor.

Serena cringed as the opening notes of “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” blared out over the room. *I can’t believe I let them talk me into this. I hate country music!* For several minutes she let Marc and Tony guide her steps while they encouraged her to watch the people around her. Pretty soon she was stomping, pivoting, and clapping her hands with the best of them. The light of approval in their eyes nearly took her breath away.

“I’m gonna get something to drink and find somebody to dance with.” Kaylee waved her hand as she hurried off.

“Will she be okay?” Serena asked Marc.

“She’ll be fine. Nobody here would serve her alcohol, and as long as she stays in the building, she’s got about a hundred chaperones.” The music started back up. “Will you dance with me, sunshine?”

Serena moved into his arms as Anne Murray’s “Could I Have This Dance” began playing. He pulled her close, his hands on her hips, and began to sway to the beat. Her arms slid up until her hands rested

against his shoulders. And then, to her amazement, he began to sing the lyrics softly near her ear.

Serena took a deep, satisfying breath, closed her eyes, and laid her head on Marc's chest. She'd never felt so desired, but it felt like something wasn't right. Then she felt the heat of Tony's body as he came up behind her and snuggled close. His hands joined Marc's at her hips as he buried his face in her neck. Together, the three of them danced to the poignant love song.

"We could dance like this forever," Tony whispered.

"If you'd just give us a chance," Marc added.

Serena gave a slight shake of her head and bit her lip as she moved away. "Guys, you're moving awfully fast. I need some time to think." Both men's shoulders slumped as frowns crossed their faces. "Come on, now, don't make me feel guilty." She gave them a weak grin. "I'm not saying no. I'm just asking for some time to think things through." She glanced around the room. "Where's the ladies' room?"

Tony pointed toward the band. "It's in that corner, princess. Do you want me to walk with you?"

"No," she said with a smirk. "But you could find me something to drink."

"You got it, sunshine." Marc caressed the side of her face. "You got any preferences?"

"Anything non-alcoholic. I'll be back in a few minutes," she called over her shoulder as she walked away. As she headed toward the bathroom, she looked around for Kaylee. She actually spotted Warren and Kyle before she saw her young friend. Both men were tall enough to stand out in the crowd.

The three of them were standing over by the outside door. Serena started to walk away when she got a closer look at Kaylee. The girl's face was ashen, her hands clenched against her abdomen. Her head shook back and forth, her eyes darting around the room almost desperately. Then, to Serena's horror, Warren took her by the arm and pulled her out the door.

Without taking time to think, Serena rushed across the room and stepped outside. She looked around frantically, but didn't see anybody, and then she heard Kaylee's voice coming from behind a parked bus.

"Stop it, Warren. I mean it. I'm not kidding." Her voice sounded like a scared child. "I'll tell my dad," she sobbed.

All the memories of her stepbrothers came back at once. She ran screaming toward Kaylee screaming. "Let her go! She's a child. What the hell's the matter with you?" She felt the tears against her face. "How could you do this to me? You're supposed to be my brothers. I won't let you do this."

* * * *

"You think she's gonna stay in there all night?" Tony tried to peer in the women's bathroom door when a lady walked in.

"No, she hasn't been in there that long." Marc ran his fingers through his hair. "You think we blew it?"

"I'm not sure. I think we should have—"

"You have to come quick. Rena's in trouble." Kaylee ran up screaming, tears streaming down her cheeks. She grabbed Tony by the arm and turned back toward the doors.

Marc threw down the cup he was holding and followed close on their heels. "What's wrong with Rena, Kaylee?"

"She's outside with Warren and Kyle," Kaylee sobbed.

Marc pushed her aside as he and Tony burst through the doors. The sight that met his eyes had his fists clenching and his blood boiling. Serena raised her knee and thrust it hard into Warren's groin. Before she could pull away, Kyle hit her across the face, knocking her to the ground. The crack of her head as it hit the pavement sent chills down his spine. He felt his heart race, his breath catching in his throat when she lay still.

With a harsh cry, Tony jumped on Kyle, taking him to the ground while Marc subdued a groaning Warren. "Call an ambulance, Kaylee," Marc called out. As he watched, Kaylee pulled her cell phone off her belt and dialed a number. Relief flooded his system when several men came out to the parking lot to offer assistance. He and Tony left them watching the two ranch hands while they went to check on their woman.

They knelt beside Serena's prone form. There were red, swollen areas on her face and the beginnings of a bruise around her left eye. What worried them most was the small amount of blood in her hair.

"I'm Sheriff Reynolds. What the hell's going on out here?"

Marc looked up at a tall, husky man holding a badge. "We're not entirely sure. Those two," he nodded toward Warren and Kyle, "were fighting with our woman when we came out."

"She was trying to protect me," Kaylee added in a tearful voice.

"Protect you from what?" Marc asked.

Kaylee twisted her hands together, her lips trembling. "They pulled me out here. Warren was trying to kiss me, and he wouldn't let go. I kept asking them to stop," she sobbed.

"Now, now, you're okay." The Sheriff put an arm around the distraught girl's shoulders. "Who are these men?"

"They work for us at the End of the Road Haven, Sheriff." Tony looked at the two men in disgust. "At least they did."

The Sheriff sighed. "All right, men. Let's get these fellows on their feet." He turned at the sound of the ambulance driving up.

"Sheriff?" Marc spoke up. "They're gonna need to be seen by the doc as well, but I don't want them riding in the same ambulance with Rena."

"Not a problem, young man. They're not hurt that bad. I'll run them by the emergency room in my cruiser." He turned to one of the men behind him. "Josh, handcuff these two and put them in the car."

Marc watched the paramedics check Serena over. Icy tingles ran along his arms as he watched them secure her head on a board for

transport. "I'm riding to the hospital with her." He turned to Tony to find tears in his partner's eyes.

"Sorry, sir, but I can't let you ride in the ambulance."

Tony glared at the ambulance driver and turned to Marc. "We'll all go." He glanced around. "Kaylee, come on honey. We're going to follow the ambulance."

On the drive to the hospital Kaylee told them about the strange things Serena screamed out. "It was like she thought she was talking to her brothers." She shrugged. "It was weird the way she just lost it. I thought she was going to seriously hurt Warren."

Marc glanced over at Tony and found the same confusion on his face that Marc was feeling. Some of Serena's problems were beginning to make more sense, and he didn't like the answers that were coming up.

"I think there's a lot Rena hasn't told us," Tony said quietly.

"Yeah, things I don't think we're gonna like." Marc glanced down at Kaylee for just a moment. "We'll talk about it later."

"You think she's gonna be all right?" Tony asked.

"She has to be." Marc took a deep breath. "I'm in love with her, Tony."

Tony sighed and ran his arm along the back of the seat. He ran his fingers lightly through Marc's hair and then gripped his shoulder firmly. "You're not the only one, partner."

* * * *

Serena slowly opened her eyes and then quickly shut them again. The light was blinding, and she had the headache from hell. She could hear strange noises and the unmistakable disinfectant smells of a hospital brought her memories rushing back. Groaning, she cautiously opened her eyes.

"Hey, look who's finally awake."

Serena stared up into the face of one of the men she'd grown to love. *Holy shit! I'm in love with them.* She tried to smile at Tony.

"Are you all right, sunshine?" Marc appeared on the other side of the bed and took her hand.

"Kaylee?" Serena whispered.

"She's fine, princess." Tony gently pushed the hair off of her face. "You saved her, Rena."

"What did—" The sudden opening of the door had Serena tensing on the bed. She looked over and saw an older man dressed in scrubs and a white jacket.

"Good, you're awake." He walked over to the bed, a group of papers clutched in his hand. "I'm Doctor Whitestaff. Can you tell me if you know where you are?"

"I'm in a hospital, but I don't know which one." Rena sighed wearily.

"Good enough for now." He walked over and pulled a chair over to the bed and sat down. "You took a pretty nasty blow to the head, Ms. Dammler. We sent you for an MRI when you first came in, and I want to talk to you about the results."

Tony walked over and took her other hand in his. "Is she okay, Doc?"

Chapter 10

Dr. Whitestaff nodded slowly as he read over the papers he'd brought to Serena's room. "The tests indicate you suffered a minor concussion along with the multiple contusions." He rubbed the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "It's not serious, but we'd like to keep you overnight for observation."

"No, I'm not staying here." Serena struggled to sit up in the bed.

"Wait!" Tony moved forward to press against her shoulder. "Come on, princess. You need to do what the doc says."

"No, I won't stay here." Serena could feel herself hyperventilating and couldn't do anything to stop it.

"All right, let's see if we can't calm down." The doctor grabbed the blood-pressure cuff and placed it around her arm. He pressed the button to activate the machine and everyone watched the dial for the results. "One fifty over ninety." He shook his head as he removed the cuff. "That's high but not dangerously so." He stepped closer and pulled out a penlight and then tapped his finger against his nose. "I want you to look right here, Ms. Dammler." He took his time shining the tiny light in each eye.

"You see something, doc?" Marc asked.

Dr. Whitestaff ignored the men and focused his attention on Serena. "Can you tell me your full name?"

"Serena Elizabeth Dammler."

"What's the month and day of your birthday?"

"February the nineteenth."

"What year is it?"

“Two thousand ten.” She narrowed her eyes. “What’s with all the weird questions?”

The doctor smiled. “Humor me for just a minute. Do you know the name of the president?”

Serena sighed. “Barack Obama, and the vice-president is Joe Biden. What the hell else do you want to know?”

Dr. Whitestaff chuckled and removed his glasses. “You’re definitely oriented to time and place.” He glanced at the men. “I can sign off on her going home if she’s not going to be alone.”

“Hell, she won’t be alone for a minute, doc,” Tony promised.

“For the next twenty-four hours, she’ll need to be wakened hourly to make sure she’s still oriented. Any signs of confusion or vomiting and you’ll need to get her back here ASAP.” He looked down at Serena. “You’re going to have to take it easy for the next few days. You’re going to feel like you were hit by a freight truck tomorrow.”

“Right,” she snarked. “That’ll be so much worse than I’m feeling now.”

The doctor frowned. “Any major changes in her demeanor or normal disposition could indicate a change in her physiological condition as well.”

Marc practically strangled on a laugh. “Sorry, Doc, but this is her *normal* disposition.”

Serena glared at her two men before turning her attention back to the doctor. “Do I get to go home or what?”

He pushed the chair away and headed for the door. “Yes, I’ll release you. It’ll take about an hour to complete the discharge paperwork. I’m going to have the pharmacy fill a prescription for some anti-inflammatory pills to make you more comfortable.” He stopped and turned around at the door. “I’m going to put a card with the hospital’s number on it with your papers. Call me anytime, day or night, if you have any questions.”

“Thanks, doc.” Marc walked over and took Serena’s hand. “We appreciate everything you’re doing.”

“No problem,” he called out as he left the room.

Marc looked down at Serena and smiled as he squeezed her hand. “Just rest, sunshine. We’ll be home in no time.”

She watched Tony turn off the bright light. “Thank you,” she whispered.” She felt his hand close around her fingers and sighed.

“Just rest, princess. Everything’s gonna be all right.”

* * * *

“Is she still sleeping?” Marc watched Tony softly shut the door to the bedroom.

“Yeah, she’s out like a light.” Tony walked over and flopped down on the couch. He lay out with his head in Marc’s lap. “Another half hour and we’ll have to wake her again.”

“Has she said anything about what happened?” Marc asked.

“You’ve been there to hear everything I have. The only thing she’s asked about is Kaylee.”

“Did you tell her we fired Warren and Kyle?”

“Yeah, she didn’t bat an eye.” Tony groaned and closed his eyes when Marc ran his fingers across his scalp. “Damn, that feels good.”

Marc chuckled and brought his other hand up to join the massage. “I think we need to—”

“Stop, get away.” Serena’s voice carried through the closed door.

Marc pushed up from the sofa at the same time Tony jumped to his feet. Both men went barreling into the darkened room.

Serena’s face contorted into a mask of fear as she thrashed around on the bed in the throes of a nightmare. “No, don’t, please. You’re my brother,” she sobbed.

“Come on, sunshine, wake up.” Marc sat down on the bed and drew her up in his arms. He focused helplessly on her tear-stained face and silently cursed the people in her life that’d caused such pain.

“Shh,” Tony crooned. “It’s okay, princess.” He scooted in behind Serena and drew her back against his chest.

“Rena, you need to wake up now. You’re just having a bad dream.” Marc placed his hand against her cheek.

* * * *

Hands are holding me down. I have to get away. Please, God, don’t let them hurt me again. Mamma, why did you leave me? Serena struggled to escape the hands trying to hold her still.

“Princess, come on now. You need to wake up.”

Serena stopped struggling at the sound of a warm, masculine voice. *That’s not Daniel or Joseph.* Slowly she opened her eyes and froze. The anguish visible on Marc’s face took her breath away.

“There’s my pretty lady.” Marc brushed her hair away from her face.

“You all right, princess?” Tony let his arms slide around her shoulders and pulled her closer.

Serena blinked, and tried to clear her thoughts. *I had the dream again.* “Yeah, I’m okay. I guess I just had a bad dream.” She cleared her throat. “Can I have a glass of water?”

“Sure, honey.” Marc rose from the bed. “I’ll be right back.”

“You wanna talk about it?” Tony asked.

Swallowing hard, she shook her head.

“It might help to get it all out in the open,” he coaxed.

“Get what out in the open?” Marc said. He stopped at the side of the bed and held a glass to Serena’s lips.

Wanting to avoid the conversation, Serena drank the water in huge gulps. When it was empty, she sank back against Tony’s chest. “Thank you,” she mumbled.

“You’re welcome. Now, what’s Tony trying to get out in the open?”

“I think she’d feel better if she talked about her nightmare.” Tony kissed the side of her neck.

Serena didn't hesitate to lie. 'I don't remember what it was about?'

Marc sighed and took her chin in his hand making it impossible for her to look away. "What happened with your brothers, Rena?"

"Stepbrothers," she said harshly.

"All right, stepbrothers." Marc tightened his hold on her chin. "What happened with them, Rena?"

Serena shut her eyes, unwilling to accept the love she saw in his gaze. *They'll be disgusted if I tell them what happened.*

"Please, princess," Tony begged, "let us help you."

Serena stared down at her hands as she felt the energy drain from her body. There was a dull pain in her chest and a thickness in her throat. "Raymond became my stepfather when I was ten years old. Daniel was fourteen and Joseph was fifteen."

"Where was their mother?" Tony asked.

"She died a few years before that. She had something wrong with her heart."

"Okay, so they all came to live with you and your mom. What happened then?" Marc released her chin and let her relax back against Tony.

She sighed. "For a while we were almost like a normal family."

"What happened to change things, princess?"

"Mom was diagnosed with cancer right after my thirteenth birthday. It must have been pretty virulent because nothing they did seem to make things better. She suffered horribly for two years before finally giving up the fight. And that's when things really went bad."

"What happened then?" Tony coaxed with a kiss against her ear.

"The guys were teenagers by then and pretty much walked, talked, and thought sex constantly. I guess I developed pretty early, and they were always staring at me. They'd walk into my bedroom without knocking or try and come into the bathroom when I took my showers."

"Son of a bitch." Tony growled.

Serena ignored him and went on with her story. "With the wisdom of a fourteen-year-old girl, I stopped eating, thinking it would stunt my growth. I barricaded my bedroom door each night and slept with my clothes on."

"Did you tell your stepfather what was going on?" asked Marc.

"I tried once." She closed her eyes for a moment and then met Marc's gaze. "I tried, but his precious sons told him I'd tempted them, always going around half naked." She looked down at her hands. "He had me praying and reading from the Bible every night for three months."

"What happened then?"

"I turned sixteen and fell in love. At least I thought it was love at the time." She laughed harshly. "I gave my virginity to a seventeen-year-old jerk who promptly told all his school friends. Daniel and Joseph heard about it and decided if I would put out for Davey, then I should have no problem putting out for them."

"Didn't you have any family or friends you could turn to? Maybe a teacher or something?" The pain in Tony's voice nearly broke her heart.

"I was sixteen years old, Tony. I didn't know who to trust."

"It's okay, princess. I'm not judging you." He rubbed her shoulders in a soothing caress.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about."

"Anyway, for the next year I kept them at arm's length and didn't date anymore. On my seventeenth birthday, Raymond decided to let me have a small party at the house. It had to be girls only, and nobody could stay past ten o'clock. He and the guys didn't stick around for the fun. They were going to come back later. The girls all left around nine, and I was cleaning up the mess when Daniel and Joseph came home."

"Shit," Marc growled softly.

“Well, to make a long story short, they both had a turn that night.” She wiped away the tears that had begun to fall down her cheek and pushed at Marc’s chest when he tried to pull her close. “It wasn’t really rape because I didn’t fight them.” She sighed. “I was too scared to do anything but let them have their way. They’d made it pretty clear I’d regret it if I said no.” She shrugged. “I thought they would hurt me if I fought, so I just lay there.”

“When did your stepfather come home?” Tony asked.

“Not until almost midnight. By then I’d cleaned up everything and stood in the shower for about forty-five minutes. For the next year I avoided being alone in the house with them. They harassed me constantly, and to get even for my rejection, they spread rumors all over town about what a slut I was.”

“And people believe them,” Marc said flatly.

“Hell, yeah, they believed it. I couldn’t even go on dates because they’d heard about how easy I was, and that’s all they really wanted. I didn’t date again until I went to Community College. The very next boy I slept with confessed that he’d done it on a dare.” She shook her head and wiped furiously at the wetness on her cheeks. “The only reason I made a play for Matt and David Carlisle was to have someone to protect me. They’re so well-known and respected. I thought if I could get them to love me then nobody would ever look down on me again.”

“Did you ever think about just up and moving away?” asked Marc.

Serena groaned and covered her face with her hands. “Of course I did,” she mumbled and then raised her head. “I don’t have much of an education and not much to offer the job market of a big city. I didn’t think I could make it if I left Mountain Vista.”

“Honey, you’re smart as a whip. You’d have no trouble at all getting a job anywhere you wanted to live, but you are wrong about something.” Marc once again made her look into his eyes. “It most certainly was rape, and don’t you ever believe otherwise.”

Serena broke down and sobbed, burying her face against his shoulder. "I saw Kyle trying to force Kaylee to kiss him, and I just lost it. She needs to be protected, Marc. She can't lose her childhood the way I did. I don't want her to have that shame."

"Sunshine, there's no shame for you in what happened. The shame belongs to your stepfather for not protecting you and to your stepbrothers for taking advantage of you." Marc pressed kisses against her hair.

Tony's tongue traced the line of her jaw. "Listen to him, princess. You've got nothing to be embarrassed about."

Serena sighed and angled her head to give him more room. "Make love to me," she whispered.

Marc leaned closer and pressed a kiss against her lips. "Baby, there's nothing I want more than to make love with you, but we just can't right now."

Serena felt a tightening in her stomach as she tried to pull away from his arms. *I knew it. I never should have told them.*

"Stop it," Tony scolded. "You're taking him the wrong way, princess."

"Damn it, Rena. You just came home from the hospital. You've got a concussion, two black eyes, and various other bruises and cuts." Marc ran his hands through his hair and groaned. "I feel like a heel getting hard just sitting here comforting you."

"I shouldn't have to tell you how much I want you," Tony added. "I've been rubbing the proof of it against your back for the last twenty minutes."

Serena giggled and looked up at Marc through her wet lashes. "Guess I'm being a little irrational, huh?"

"You are if you think I'm not hard enough to pound nails just sitting here smelling your sweet pussy." He leaned forward and gave her a hard, brief kiss. "You're gonna be the death of us, woman."

Tony slid out from behind her and sat on the edge of the mattress. “Doc said you had to take it easy the next few days, and that’s what you’re gonna do.” He nodded toward Marc. “You take the other side.”

Serena watched Marc walk around the bed. Her gaze focused on the prominent bulge in the front of his jeans. “What are you doing?” she asked. Tony lay down at her left side while Marc cuddled up to her right.

“Watching over our woman and keeping the nightmares at bay,” Tony whispered right before he covered her lips with his own.

“Hey, give me some of that sugar,” Marc demanded. He pulled her head around and gave her a quick but thorough kiss. “Now we want you to relax and go back to sleep.”

She glanced down at his tented jeans and then over to Tony’s. “Are you guys gonna go take care of that?”

“No, we’re not.” Marc settled farther into the bed and pulled her to her side. “We’re gonna be right here taking care of you, sunshine.”

Tony scooted close and spooned against her back. She could feel his hardness pressing into her ass. “Just rest, princess. We’re gonna be with you every minute. Then, in a couple of days when we get the okay from the doctor, we’ll show you just how much you mean to us.”

Feeling happy tears escaping down her cheeks, Serena smiled. She’d never felt so safe and wanted.

* * * *

“You sure you don’t mind driving me to town?” Serena glanced over at the driver of the blue Ford pickup truck that carried her toward the doctor’s office in Grays Prairie. Marc and Tony had drafted Kaylee to take Serena to her appointment when a freak storm took out some of their fencing in the south pasture.

“Of course I don’t mind.” She shrugged and smiled. “Any excuse to get out from under Dad’s watchful eye is good.” She cut her eyes

over toward Serena. “Thought if you felt like it we could go to Millie’s Café for lunch before heading home.”

Serena smiled. “Actually, that’ll be great. I’d planned on asking you to stop there anyway.”

“Really? You don’t mind going out right now?”

“Of course not. Why would you ask that?”

“Well, um.” Kaylee bit her lip. “I just thought you might be embarrassed for anybody to see you.”

Serena laughed. “You mean because I have two black eyes and a rainbow of purples, greens and yellows decorating the side of my face.”

Kaylee grinned. “Yeah, that’s about it.”

“No, honey, I don’t care who sees me.” She took a deep breath and smiled. “I’m alive, and you’re safe, and everything’s right in my world.”

“I’ll never be able to thank you enough, Rena.”

“You can thank me by sticking with guys your own age from now on.”

Kaylee snorted. “I’ll be lucky if my Dad let’s me date before I’m thirty. Grounding me was the first thing he and my mother have agreed on since I turned five years old.”

Serena looked out the window as the pulled into the parking lot at the doctor’s office. “You just have to remember they love you, honey. Nothing else really matters.”

“I know you’re right.” Kaylee opened her door. “Well, don’t just sit there, woman. Let’s go get you checked out.”

Two hours later, Serena breathed a sigh of relief when she and Kaylee walked through the door of Millie’s Café. The young doctor had given her a clean bill of health. The bruises would fade in time and, hopefully, so would the memories.

“Well, hello, Kaylee.” Millie Carver came hurrying toward the front wiping her hands on a dishtowel. “Haven’t seen you in a coon’s age, girl.” She turned and smiled at Serena. And you’re—” Her hand

flew to her chest as she gasped. “Good lord, honey, what happened to you? You’re here visiting Marc and Tony, but I’m sorry, I don’t remember your name.”

Serena laughed. “That’s okay. We only met the one time, and I wasn’t at my best that day.”

“I hate to tell you, hon, but you don’t exactly look your best today either.”

“I’m Rena, and I’m still a guest at the End of the Road Haven.”

“She got beat up saving me from Warren and Kyle at the dance down in Gun Barrel,” Kaylee announced.

“Oh, I heard about that, but nobody had any names.” Millie lowered her voice. “You best be careful while you’re here. Those boys have been hanging around town here lately.” She pointed toward a booth. “Why don’t you take a load off and I’ll bring you both a big glass of my fresh lemonade while you look over the menu.”

Kaylee shifted around in the seat while her eyes darted nervously around the room. “You think we’ll see either of them today?”

Serena reached over and clasped her hand. “Honey, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Those men are in enough trouble now. They’re not going to risk getting in any deeper.” She pulled her hand back when Millie brought them their drinks. “Millie, if you get a chance could I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure thing, hon. It’s gonna be a little busy for the next hour, but you take your time eating your lunch, and I’ll sit down and have a piece of pie with you later.”

“That’s fine.” She grinned up at the older woman. “You got any of those chicken and dumplings today?”

“You bet I do, girlfriend. What about you, Kaylee? The usual?”

The young girl laughed. “What else is there?”

Serena frowned. “What’s your usual?”

“Double bacon cheeseburger and an order of onion rings.” Kaylee and Millie recited the order together.

“Damn, that sounds good.” Serena groaned.

“Tell you what,” Kaylee drawled. “If Millie cuts that cheeseburger in half, we could share our lunch.” She looked up at Millie through her lashes. “It’s been a long time since I got to sample your dumplings.”

“Well, then, I’ll just have to put that order in two bowls.” She winked and hurried off toward the kitchen.

“Can I ask you about life on the ranch, Kaylee?”

“Well, sure, but you do know I don’t live there all the time, right?”

“Is it hard getting used to being without all the conveniences of city life?”

Kaylee’s brow furrowed as her head tilted to the side. “I don’t think I understand.”

Serena sighed heavily. “There’s no cable television, no movie theaters, no health clubs, no beauty parlors. Hell, the cabin doesn’t even have a dishwasher or washer and dryer. How do you stand losing all the little luxuries you have at your mom’s when you come here for the summer?”

Kaylee swallowed hard and chewed on her bottom lip. “Rena, Dad’s house has all that. Well, he doesn’t have a beauty parlor or movie theater, but he does have a big-screen television.”

“Oh, well, I guess that makes sense.” She shrugged. “He’s the foreman, so I guess he can afford to improve his living conditions.”

“Rena, um.” She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “What’s all this about?”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I should have explained a little better.” She took a long drink of her lemonade. “Truth is I’m thinking about sticking around.”

“Really,” Kaylee squealed. “That’d be so great! I’d love knowing you were going to be there every time I come.”

“Hold on, girl. It’s still in the planning stage. I’d have to find a way to earn a living here.”

“Earn a living?” Kaylee asked.

“Yeah, I need a job. The guys work hard, and it’s only right that I do my fair share.”

“But they—”

“Okay, girls, here’s your lunch.” Millie began setting dishes down on the table. “Scoot on over, Kaylee. Everybody’s been served, and I’ve got time to sit and chat for a few minutes.” She glanced over at Serena. “What’d you want to talk to me about, Rena?”

Serena took a deep breath. “I got the impression that you know just about everybody in these parts.”

Millie snorted. “You got that right. I know everybody and everything about everybody.”

“That’s great. Can you tell me if you know anybody that’s looking for office help?”

Millie frowned and looked over at Kaylee before turning her attention back to Serena. “You know somebody looking for a job?”

Serena grinned. “Yeah, me.” She laughed. “I know it sounds crazy, but I’m thinking about hanging around for a while. The guys and I, well, we...” She could feel herself blush.

“I take it things are going well with that handsome pair?” Millie said with a smirk.

Serena groaned before she could stop herself. “Things couldn’t be any better. I don’t think I ever want to leave.” She took a sobering breath. “But I want to be fair. I can’t expect them to keep giving me a free ride. I need to find a job, so I can pay my share of the living expenses.”

Millie pulled her order pad against her chest as a dazed look came over her face. “You want to pay part of their expenses?” she mumbled.

Serena frowned. “Sure, the more money coming in the better. Hell, I might even make enough to get a satellite dish installed.” She couldn’t understand the look of shock on both women’s face. “I’ve got experience working in an office. I can type seventy words per minute, and I have an Associate Degree as a Paralegal Secretary.

Surely I can find a job either here or in Gun Barrel. Do you know of anything?"

Chapter 11

“Well, um.” Millie cleared her throat. “I did hear that Carter Lewis at the Feed and Seed is looking to hire a bookkeeper part-time.” She smiled over at Kaylee. “His wife’s expecting again, and she wants him home more.”

“Part-time, huh? Well, it would be a start.” She grinned. “Who knows? Maybe I could dazzle him with my expertise, and he’d decide he can’t run his business without me.” She thought for a moment. “You mind if we stop by there when we leave here, Kaylee?”

“Honey, I wouldn’t do that,” Mille sputtered. “You don’t exactly look like a job applicant today.”

“Shit!” Serena’s hand went to her bruised face. “Think my multicolored face would put him off?”

Millie burst out laughing. “I think he might be afraid to hire you, looking like that.”

Kaylee giggled. “If he did hire you, he’d sure be afraid to fire you.”

Serena shook her head. “Okay, you two have convinced me. We’ll head back to the ranch today, and I’ll come back to town in a day or two.”

Kaylee glanced at Millie. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. I’m sure Marc or Tony would bring you back.”

“Well, okay, then.” Millie got to her feet. “I’ve got to get back to work. Lunch is on me today in honor of your saving this little girl.” She frowned and shook her finger when Serena opened her mouth to object. “No arguments, now. Just promise me you’ll come back and visit me again.”

Serena smiled. "It's a deal. You have my word on it."

"Good enough for me. I'll see you girls later." Without another word she went to wait on another table.

Serena watched as Kaylee finished off the last of her lemonade. "You ready to head out?"

"Sure am. This was great! I hope we can do it again sometime."

"I'd like that a lot, Kaylee." She stood and grabbed her purse. "Would you mind if we stopped at the grocery before we hit the road? I'd like to pick up a few things and surprise the guys with dinner tonight."

"Sure, that's no problem. We can just leave the truck here and walk. It's only a couple of blocks down."

"Sounds perfect. Let's go." Together they left the restaurant and began walking down the sidewalk.

"Well, lookee here. If it ain't superwoman in the flesh."

Serena spun around, pushing Kaylee behind her, when she heard the sarcastic male voice.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Kyle? Why can't you just leave us alone?" Kaylee peeked over Serena's shoulder.

"Be quiet, Kaylee." Serena spoke softly and turned her attention to the two men now blocking the sidewalk. Their clothes were wrinkled and dirty, their faces unshaven. "What do you want, Kyle?"

"We want you to call off the dogs, woman."

Serena frowned. "I don't understand."

Warren stepped closer, his posture stiff and his jaw clenched. "We want you to consider dropping the charges against us."

Serena looked at with suspicion. "Why would I want to do that?"

Kyle threw his hands up and walked away.

Warren sighed heavily and raked his fingers through his unkempt hair. "Look, we were drunk. It never should've happened, but it did. I know we were at fault." He glared over her shoulder at Kaylee. "But we weren't the only ones at fault. That one's been flirting with us ever since she got here. A man can only take so much."

“You can’t possibly be blaming your actions on a sixteen-year-old girl.” Serena wanted to throttle him. “I don’t care what she did. You had no right to touch her.”

“We admit that,” Warren said quietly. “We’re just asking for a little compassion. Can’t you just drop the charges? We’ve already made plans to leave the area. Your rich boyfriends made sure we couldn’t get another job in Texas.”

“Rich boyfriends?” Serena said in confusion.

“Oh, sorry,” Kyle snarked. “Don’t you call them boyfriends?”

“Rich?” She frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Kyle moved closer, his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flaring. “Well, their spread ain’t the biggest in Texas, but when you add in the oil company they own, I doubt you can find many richer in these parts.”

Serena turned around to look at Kaylee. The young girl’s cheeks were flushed pink, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Is it true?” she asked quietly.

Kaylee nodded and bit her lip. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“But why?” Serena asked in confusion. “Why are they living in that little cabin?”

Kaylee looked down at her feet. “They don’t really live in the cabin. Dad said nobody was supposed to know they lived in the main house last summer when I visited.” She shrugged. “He didn’t say why.”

Serena looked around in confusion and then pressed her fist to her lips. *They lied to me. They listened to all the stories about me in Mountain Vista, and they brought me back here for a little fun and games. Hell, I even told them I wanted to snag a rich husband. She felt a tear slide down her cheek. Now they’ll never believe I fell in love.*

She wiped at the wetness on her face and turned to Warren. “Don’t worry about anything. I’ll talk to the sheriff and have the

charges dropped if you promise you'll stay away from young girls in the future and get the hell out of Texas. Do we have a deal?"

Warren's eyebrows rose up into his hair. "Agreed." He grabbed Kyle's arm and pulled him away.

Serena watched as they jumped into a truck parked in front of the bank and quickly drove off. She turned when Kaylee put her hand on her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" asked Kaylee.

"No, I need to go home." *Shit, I can't go home. Eric's still out there.* She reached into her bag and pulled out her cell phone. She scrolled through the numbers until she found the one for Carlisle Hardware and quickly dialed, adding the long-distance prefix.

"Carlisle Hardware, how can I help you?"

"Cass, thank God it's you."

"Who is this?"

"I'm sorry. This is Serena Dammler."

"Serena, I didn't recognize your voice. How are you doing?"

"Not so good, actually. Do you have the phone number for the DA that's handling Eric's case in Texas?"

"No, but I could call the attorney that handled my divorce and get it from him. What's going on?"

Serena sighed. "There's a problem with my protection. I'm going to need to stay somewhere else until they capture his sorry ass." There was a long silence on the other end of the line. "Cass, are you still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. Did you say you need someplace to stay until Eric is captured?"

"Yes," she cleared her throat. "I can't stay with the two bounty hunters that came after him anymore."

"Bounty hunters? I thought they were from the Houston PD."

Serena let out a brittle laugh. "I believed a lot of things that aren't true. Anyway, I need to get in touch with them pretty quick. I'm in

Texas and not very comfortable with the idea I could run into Eric getting my groceries.”

“Honey, I’m not sure what’s going on at your end, but you’ve got nothing to worry about with Eric.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Eric was re-captured at a motel about a hundred miles into California the day you were discharged from the hospital and left Mountain Vista.”

Serena’s mouth dropped open. It felt like a vise was squeezing against her chest. “He’s in custody?” She barely recognized her own voice.

“Serena, are you okay? Can you hear me?” Cass cried out.

Serena blinked back her tears. “Yeah, I’m okay, Cass. If Eric’s behind bars, I’m more than okay.”

“Honey, what’s going on?”

“No time to explain now, but I thank you for the info. I’ll be home soon, and I’ll tell you all about it. Gotta run now.” She flipped the phone closed without waiting for Cass to respond. *How long would they have kept me here without telling me?* She looked up and was surprised to see Kaylee standing there. Her own problems had consumed her until she’d forgotten about her young friend. “Honey, I need to go home.”

“Sure,” Kaylee said hesitantly. “We can be back at the ranch in less than an hour.”

“No, I mean home to Oregon. Is there a place around here I can catch a bus?”

“Uh, well, um, you can get a bus out of Gun Barrel.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I came in on the bus from the airport in Dallas when I came to stay with Dad.”

“Then I need a ride to Gun Barrel.”

“Wait, don’t you need to go pack?”

Serena shook her head. “No, the only thing there are the clothes they bought me and a few personal things that I can live without. I’ve got my purse and money with me. I just need a ride.” When Kaylee’s face turned pale, Serena took her in her arms. “Don’t worry about it, honey. I’ll find some other way to get to the bus station. You just go on back to the ranch.”

“No, I’ll drive you if you insist. I just wish you’d reconsider. You’re gonna break their hearts, Rena. Anybody can see how much they love you.”

Serena brushed a tear away. *If only that were true.* “Just let it go, Kaylee. Some things aren’t meant to be.” She hugged her young friend hard. “Let’s get moving, girl.”

An hour later Serena looked at her watch and sighed. “It’s only two o’clock and the next bus doesn’t leave until six.” She smiled at Kaylee. “You need to get back on the road.” She pulled her into a hug. “Promise me you’ll go straight back to the ranch and straight back to your dad’s house.”

“I promise,” she said unhappily. “Will you write to me?”

“You bet I will.” She pulled a small notebook out of her purse and handed it and a pen to Kaylee. “Give me your address.” She smiled when Kaylee handed it back. “You go on now, and drive safely. No speeding, young lady.”

Kaylee snorted, gave her one last hug and walked away.

Serena looked around the bus station. It was dark and dingy and she didn’t relish spending the next few hours sitting on any of the plastic chairs that littered the room. There were benches along the sidewalk outside that would be much nicer. Glancing around one last time, she left the building and took up residence on the bench seat closest to the door.

Serena hung up her phone and glanced at her watch. The Sheriff hadn’t been too happy to hear she wouldn’t be willing to testify against the two ranch hands. She’d been sitting outside the bus station for forty-five minutes, and she was already regretting her decision to

leave. *Maybe they had a good reason for not telling me the truth. They said they cared for me. Hell, they even used the word love a few times.* She covered her face with her hands. *Who am I trying to kid? It doesn't matter what their reasons were. When Kaylee tells them I know the truth, they're never going to believe I love them. They're going to think I'm just saying it because of the money.*

"I thought that was you."

Serena started and looked over at the car that had pulled up to the curb. The woman driving looked vaguely familiar. "Excuse me? Are you talking to me?"

"I sure am, honey. Are you waiting on the bus?"

"Yes," she answered cautiously. *What the hell else would I be doing sitting in front of the bus station?*

"You don't remember me, do you?"

Serena frowned at the young woman. "No, I'm sorry. You look familiar, but I can't quite place where I've seen you before."

The stranger smiled. "Honey, I sold you all those pretty new clothes you have." She threw Rena a saucy wink. "I work at Western Wear, and my name's Esther."

"Of course," Serena smiled. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you right off."

"No problem, honey. We only saw each other once."

"Yes, but you obviously remember me."

Esther giggled. "It'd be hard to forget the person that got me the largest commission on a sale I've ever had." She glanced toward the door to the station. "Are your men waiting inside?"

"Uh, no, no they're not. I'm traveling alone."

"That's too bad. Where ya headed?" Esther frowned. "What's your name, honey?"

"Sorry, I'm Rena. I mean, Serena. I'm taking the bus to Dallas so I can get a flight home." Serena didn't know why she felt comfortable telling this woman her plans, but it felt good to be talking to someone.

Esther's grin widened. "Well, this is your lucky day, Serena. I'm heading to Dallas, and I sure would love the company. It's a long ride, and it can get pretty boring when you're driving it alone."

"You want to give me a ride to Dallas?" Serena asked incredulously.

"Honey, you'd be doing me a favor. Having somebody to talk to helps keep me alert for the driving." She shrugged and gave Serena a beseeching look. "So, you in?"

There was only one answer she could possibly give. "Absolutely!" She hurried over and opened the car door.

"What about your luggage?"

Serena hesitated and then slid into the seat and reached for the seat belt. "I don't have any."

Esther gave her a shrewd look. "You in some kind of trouble, honey?"

Serena choked on a laugh. "No, I'm not in trouble. Just overstayed my welcome, and now it's time to go home." She looked down at her hands. "I really appreciate the ride. I wasn't looking forward to spending several hours on a bus."

Esther continued to watch her through narrowed eyes for another minute, and then she smiled. "Well, then, let's hit the road."

* * * *

Marc pulled the last piece of barbed wire tight and waited for Tony to secure it. It had been a long, grueling morning. The storm that raged through yesterday had taken down trees that had, in turn, taken out large sections of their fencing. It had been necessary to round up the wandering cattle and herd them home before they could begin the repairs.

"Don't look so down, cowboy. This is the last post." Tony grunted as he lined up the guide and fastened the wire to the post with wooden staples.

“Why the hell hasn’t she called?” Marc grumbled.

“Could be any number of reasons. Most likely she’s off shopping with Kaylee and just lost track of the time.”

“Well I’m gonna tan her ass for worrying us this way,” Marc promised.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I can see that happening.”

“What the hell?”

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked, worry evident in his voice.

“Look!” Marc pointed toward the far end of the pasture. Kaylee was riding hell-bent for leather toward them.

“Damn, she’s gonna break her neck,” Tony cursed.

Marc shook his head. “Something’s wrong.” He watched in silence as the young girl drew closer. “What is it, girl,” he yelled.

* * * *

“Son of a bitch.” Marc growled. After Kaylee had explained things, they’d ridden back to the ranch and jumped in the truck. Hell, they’d broken every speed limit between End of the Road Haven and Gun Barrel.

“You mean to tell me you sold a young woman a ticket to Dallas, and now you have no idea where she is?” Tony yelled.

Marc could see the vein pulsing in Tony’s temple as he scowled at the cowering man behind the ticket counter. “Didn’t you think it strange that she didn’t show up to get on the bus,” he asked quietly.

“Look, man, I had no way of knowing she didn’t get on the bus.” The young man took a step back, the tension in his body evident by his stiff neck and rapid breathing. “I only sell the tickets. I don’t check them when people get on the bus.”

“Come on, partner, let’s get out of here.” Marc pulled on Tony’s arm and urged him toward the door. “We can ask around at these other shops and see if anybody remembers where she went.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He shook his head. “Somebody’s bound to remember a woman who looked like a walking accident victim.”

“Then let’s start hitting these stores.”

Two hours later, Marc was ready to kill somebody. A dozen people remember the “poor little bruised girl” sitting on the bench outside the bus station, but nobody had a clue what happened to her. He climbed into the truck and slammed the door. He drew in a ragged breath and laid his head on the steering wheel. “What now?” he asked.

Tony placed his hand on Marc’s neck. “Now we do what we do best.” He waited until Marc looked up. “Hell, man, we’re former DEA agents and part-time bounty hunters. We ought to be able to find one scrawny girl.”

Marc chuckled and sat up straight. He felt a sense of calm settle over him. “Let’s get back to the ranch. We can get a tracer out on her credit cards and find out if and when she uses them.”

“Now you’re thinking straight.” Tony fastened his seat belt. “We should give that ex-wife of Abernathy’s a call in Oregon. She could give us a call if Rena shows up there.”

Marc stared straight ahead and exhaled slowly. “We’ve got to find her, Tony.” He turned to look at his long-time lover. “I’m in love with her.”

Tony’s head fell back, his lips parting in a long sigh. “I’m glad to hear that, cowboy, ’cause I’m in love with her too.”

Marc grinned and started the truck. “Then what the hell are we waiting for? Let’s bring our woman home.”

Tony groaned. “First we’ll have to tell her the truth, the entire truth.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll fall off that bridge when we come to it.” He put the truck in gear. “Let’s get to it.”

* * * *

Serena looked up at the Dallas night-lights and breathed a sigh of relief. It had been a long drive, and she was exhausted. Esther turned out to be a pleasant traveling companion, and Serena would forever be grateful she'd come along when she did.

"Did you want me to drop you at the airport?" Esther asked, maneuvering the little car expertly through the heavy traffic.

Serena's eyes drifted shut, and she felt heaviness in her arms and legs. "Could you recommend a clean but cheap motel somewhere near the airport? I don't think I'm up to just sitting around and waiting for a flight."

"Well, I could." Esther cleared her throat. "You've let me rattle off pretty much the entire time we've been on the road, but you haven't really asked me anything about what I'm doing here."

Serena opened her eyes and gazed at the young woman. "I'm sorry. It never occurred to me to question you." She frowned. "Why did you come to Dallas?"

Esther snickered. "Actually, I'm taking a vacation, a paid vacation." She shot Serena a wicked grin. "I live in a dinky little apartment in Gun Barrel. It's nice enough, but really tiny." She shrugged. "Hell, it's all I can afford."

"I'm not sure I'm following this conversation," Serena said.

"My parents are, well, what would you say? They're quite a bit more affluent than I am."

Serena rubbed her temple. "Still not following."

"They're rich, okay? They live in this ridiculously large house in the burbs of Dallas, and they don't like leaving it sitting empty."

"So you're here visiting your folks?"

"Not visiting the folks. Visiting their house." She laughed. "They're taking a three-week cruise, and I'm going to house-sit for them." She sighed. "For three wonderful weeks, I can swim in their pool, eat their food, and watch their big-screen television."

“Sounds like a great way to spend your vacation.” Serena didn’t know what else to say.

“Honey, what I’m getting at is you can come home with me.”

“What?” Serena cried.

“Look, you already told me you just couldn’t stay with the guys any longer. Do you have to be back in Oregon for a job or family?”

Serena shook her head. “No, I’m going to have to find a new job when I get home.”

“So, what’s the hurry? No offense, honey, but you need to let those bruises heal before you go looking for a job.”

Serena snorted. “Yeah, I’ve heard that before.”

“So, come home with me. We can chill for the next few weeks. It’ll give you time to heal and get your head on straight before you go home.”

Serena thought for a moment. *Nobody will be able to find me if I stay at Esther’s house.* “Are you sure your folks won’t mind?”

“They’ll never know. Their flight to Florida left early this morning. I had to work my shift at the store today before I could leave. It’ll just be us girls.”

Serena took a deep breath as a feeling of thickness formed in her throat. “Sounds perfect, Esther. I’d love to spend a couple of weeks with you.”

* * * *

Two weeks later Serena sat down next to the phone. In the past two weeks her bruises had faded, her cuts had healed, and she’d cried an ocean of tears. Now, she just felt disheartened. It was time she got back to her life. She checked the number on the business card she had in her hand and dialed before she changed her mind.

“Fenning, Ross and Levy. How may I direct your call?”

Serena cleared her throat. “Alexander Peroit, please.”

“May I tell him who is calling?” asked the disembodied voice.

“Serena Dammler.”

“One moment, please.”

Serena twirled the phone cord while she waited for Alex to pick up the phone.

“Serena? Is that you?”

“Hi, Alex. It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Where the bloody hell are you?” he demanded.

“Geez, I’m fine, Alex. Thanks for asking.”

“Don’t go all postal on me, missy. You’ve got half the state looking for you.”

Serena froze. “What are you talking about?”

Alex sighed heavily. “If I understand it correctly, the Houston PD has a couple of bounty hunters looking for you.” He was silent for a moment. “What did you do? Are you in some kind of trouble? When they called me, they wouldn’t give me any details.”

“Oh, for crying out loud. No, I’m not in any trouble.” She swore softly. “Look, Alex, the situation with the bounty hunters is personal.”

“Personal, huh? I don’t think I want to know.”

“Believe me. You’re better off not knowing.”

“Well, you still need to contact the sheriff in Mountain Vista. They need a final statement to charge Eric with your assault.”

“Okay, I’ll take care of that right away.”

“Well, if you’re not in trouble, why did you call?”

“I wanted to ask if your offer of a job is still good.”

“You want to move to Portland?”

“Yes, I do. I want a clean start somewhere new.” She hesitated. “We worked well together before, and I think we could again.”

“You don’t have to convince me, Serena. I’m fairly new to the firm, and I’m the only one without a personal assistant. I’d be happy to try it out on a trial basis.”

Serena breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Alex. You won’t be sorry, I promise.”

“When do you want to start?”

She thought quickly. "I can be there in as little as four days. I still need to go to Mountain Vista and pack up my personal things."

"Hell, that will put you starting on Friday. You're also going to have to find a place to stay. Why don't you plan on starting two weeks from today? If you get settled sooner, you can give me a call, and I'll bring you in sooner."

"That sounds fair. If you can think of any apartments close to your office that might be available give me a call."

"I can do you one better than that. When you get ready to head up this way, give me a call, and I'll give you directions to our place. Jennifer and I moved in together, and we've got a guest room that's yours while you look for a place. Hell, Jennifer will probably be willing to drive you around to check them all out."

"That's great news about you and Jennifer. Am I going to hear wedding bells soon?" she teased.

"Definitely in the not so distant future, but no date picked out yet."

"Well, if you're sure she won't mind, I'd be a fool to turn down your offer."

"Never took you for a fool, Serena. So, I'll hear from you soon?"

"By the first of next week for sure. Thanks again, Alex. You're a real lifesaver."

"You just take care of yourself, Serena. And get your butt up here, girl. My office work is piling up. See you soon."

"Bye." Serena hung up the phone and thought about everything she needed to get done. *I need to get a plane ticket home. Pack up my apartment and let my landlord know I'm leaving. Go by the sheriff's office and give a statement.* She walked over to the mirror and looked at her reflection. "What are you going to do if they come looking for you?"

Chapter 12

Serena flew into Portland and rented a car to drive to Mountain Vista to gather her belongings. Her hands were sweating, her knuckles white as she gripped the steering wheel driving through her hometown. Everything looked the same, and yet everything felt different. She knew in her heart once she left this place she would never come back.

She drove straight to her apartment and spent two days packing up her clothes and giving away her cheap furniture. The landlord was perfectly happy to see her go since breaking her lease meant he could keep her deposit. She'd signed a statement at the sheriff's office and asked them politely not to let anyone know she was in town. Like her landlord, Sheriff Burtram had seemed happy to learn she was leaving Mountain Vista.

There was only one thing left for her to do before she could leave for good. She needed to go to the bank and close out her account. *I just hope I can sneak in without running into anybody I know.*

* * * *

Cass Carlisle grumbled as she loaded the groceries into the backseat of her car. It had taken twice as long in the store as usual and she was exhausted. She'd married Matthew Carlisle in a civil ceremony a few weeks ago and then the twin brothers had taken her on a whirlwind honeymoon. It might be weeks before she felt normal again. She had turned around to return the buggy to the store when

she caught sight of a familiar face walking out of the bank. Pushing the cart aside, she rushed to catch up with her missing neighbor.

“Serena Dammler, where on Earth have you been hiding?” Cass scolded.

Serena whirled around, her face going pasty white. “Oh, it’s you, Cass.” She visibly relaxed and walked closer. “I’ve been staying with a friend in Dallas for a few weeks. How are things with you?”

Cass narrowed her eyes. “Things are fine, thank you. Now don’t keep me in suspense. The last time we talked you told me Marc and Tony had lied to you. Have you talked to them since you ran out on them?”

Serena’s eyes widened and she clutched her purse tightly to her chest. “I did not run out on them, and since when did you start calling them Marc and Tony?”

Cass grimaced. “Since they started calling me weekly to find out if I’d seen or heard from you.” She put her hand on Serena’s arm. “Honey, I think you’re wrong about them. They seem like they really care about you. And I mean *really* care about you. Maybe even love you.”

Serena barked out a laugh. “Yeah, they love me so much they did nothing but lie to me the whole time we were together.” She cocked her head to the side. “Did they tell you they’re not with the Houston PD? Did they tell you they’re rich? And I do mean rich. Hell, Tony owns a damn oil company.”

Cass rolled her eyes. “So, what’s the problem? I thought you always wanted a rich husband. And what could be better than two rich husbands?”

“I did, or hell, I do want a rich husband. And it might have all worked out great if I hadn’t gone and fell in love with the two jerks.”

Cass’ brow furrowed as she shook her head. “You lost me, honey.”

Serena sighed and blinked back her tears. “I never told them I love them, Cass. If I tell them now, they’ll just think I’m saying it because

of the money. They'll never believe I fell in love with the poor cowboys that live in a two-room cabin."

"Oh, honey, don't cry." Cass gave her a warm hug. "I think you're wrong, Serena. The men that have called me begging for any information I could give them are grieving. Honey, they want you back, and I don't think they care about anything else."

"Well, I care, Cass. I don't want a marriage that's based on anything but love. All those weeks on the ranch taught me that. I can't spend the rest of my life wondering what they're thinking, or how they're feeling. I can't live with the doubt I feel about them right now."

"Serena, you're wrong. I think you should come to the store with me and call them right now. Give them a chance to explain why they did what they did. Let them make things right."

Serena bit her bottom lip and looked away. She took a shaky breath and gave Cass a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Okay, I'll give them a call, but I'll have to do it tomorrow. I've got to hit the road, or it'll be dark before I get to Portland."

"What's in Portland?"

"I'm starting a new job with Alex Peroit in a couple of weeks. I've got to get up there and find myself an apartment."

"Don't do anything drastic until you call Texas, Serena. I don't want you to have any regrets."

Serena swallowed hard. "Don't worry. I'll call them when I get settled."

"You're not going to—"

"Well, look what the dogs dragged in, Daniel."

Cass turned to see Serena's stepbrothers walking down the sidewalk.

"Stay the hell away from me, Joseph. I'm not in the mood for your foolishness." Serena's face flushed a rosy red.

Daniel smirked and stepped closer. "You're in a heap of trouble, little girl. Dad's been looking for your ass for weeks now. Those

Texas lawmen called to find out where you were, so he knows you up and run off.”

“He’s gonna make you sorry you came back, little sister.” Joseph leaned against the side of the bank. “You need to come home with us now.”

Serena narrowed her eyes and pushed Cass behind her. “I’m leaving Mountain Vista, and I’m not coming back. You can tell Raymond he can go straight to hell. He’s not my father, and I’m over the age of twenty-one. He has no right to order me around anymore.”

“You always were stupid, Serena. You can’t get away from him that easily, and you know it. You might as well come along and take your medicine like a big girl.” Daniel moved forward and wrapped his hand around Serena’s arm.

“Take your hand off of her,” Cass screamed and smacked him on the side of his arm with her purse.

“Don’t touch me.” Serena growled. She moved forward quickly and brought her right knee up into the hardening groin of her stepbrother. He exhaled sharply releasing a tiny squeak while both of his hands grabbed the front of his trousers. The large man dropped to his knees on the unforgiving sidewalk.

“Holy shit,” Cass exclaimed. She glanced toward Joseph and grinned when he turned pale and ran away. She turned back to Serena. “Are you okay?”

Serena grinned. “Never better. I’ve needed to do that for ten long years.” She sighed and walked toward a car parked in front of the bank. The front and back seat were loaded with boxes. “I’ve got to go, Cass. Give the guys my best and tell them I said congrats on making an honest woman out of you.”

Cass’s mouth dropped open. “Who told you?”

Serena grinned. “Who didn’t?” She unlocked the car and got in. Before she closed the door she gazed up at Cass again. “Thanks for everything, Cass, and especially for forgiving me. I’m glad things worked out for you three.”

Before Cass could say anything, Serena shut the door, started the engine and drove away. Hearing a groan she turned around and watched Daniel Edwards rolling around on the sidewalk. “Do I need to call you a doctor?” she asked.

“You can kiss my ass, bitch,” he gasped. “You better be calling a lawyer because I’m gonna have my dear sister arrested for assault.”

“Can it, ass-wipe. I’m a witness, and I’ll swear in a court of law you attacked her, and she was defending herself.” Cass ignored Daniel’s cursing and thought for a moment. “Maybe you’re right, Daniel. Maybe I should call someone in *law enforcement*.”

* * * *

“Little darlin’, I don’t know how we can thank you.” Marc gripped the phone tightly in a hand that trembled.

“An invitation to the wedding will be thanks enough for me,” Cass said.

“Hell, we’ll send a private jet to pick you up for that,” he promised. He looked up when Tony came strolling into the room.

Cass laughed. “You just do right by her, Marc. She’s had enough assholes in her life.”

“We’ll take care of her, honey. You have my solemn vow on that.”

“All right then. Don’t just sit there. Go get your woman.”

Before Marc could say anything, the feisty woman hung up. He glanced over at Tony. His partner’s eyebrow raised, and he cocked his head to the side. “We’ve got her,” Marc cried out.

Tony straightened and grinned. “You’re sure? There’s no mistake?”

“A little Oregon birdie told me exactly where to find her.” Marc spent several minutes telling Tony everything Cass had told him.

Tony guffawed loudly. “She really coldcocked that asshole brother of hers?” he asked.

“Knead him right in the *cojones*, according to Cass.” Marc shook his head. “Our lady has really grown up since she left us.”

“Do you think she’s going to want to come back?” Tony asked.

“She’s in love with us, partner. But she’s afraid we’ll think she’s only saying that because of the money.”

“Hell, Millie told us she was trying to find a job so she could help out with our expenses. I don’t need any other proof than that.”

“Me either, but our little sunshine doesn’t know we talked to Millie.”

“So, what’s the plan, cowboy?” Tony leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

Marc frowned. “What makes you think I have a plan?”

“Puhleeez,” Tony drawled. “You’ve always got a sneaky plan to carry out at a moment’s notice.”

Marc grinned. “Well, it just so happens.”

“I knew it,” Tony groaned. “Lay it on me, cowboy. What are we going to do?”

“I’m going to put a call through to a certain Oregon attorney, and you’re going to get on the phone and get the jet gassed up.” He gave Tony a wink. “We’re going to Oregon.”

* * * *

Serena sighed as she stared out the office window. The view of the Hawthorne Bridge looming over the Willamette River always took her breath away.

“Feeling a little homesick, Serena? Alex asked.

She turned and offered him a smile. “Homesick for Mountain Vista? Absolutely not.” *Homesick for a little two-room cabin in Texas, absolutely.* “What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to pick up Jennifer for dinner.”

“Nag, nag, nag. You’re worse than a mother hen.” Alex scowled at her playfully. “I’m not supposed to meet her for another hour, and I

thought I'd show you where to unload all those books that arrived today."

"Thank you," Serena said sincerely. "Those boxes are stacked up around my desk. I practically need hiking shoes to get in and out of my chair now."

Alex chuckled. "You always were such a drama queen." He motioned toward the hall. "Come on."

Serena followed Alex down the long, wide hallway. The walls on each side were floor to ceiling book shelves. Each side had a rolling ladder on a track that could be pushed back and forth to enable you to retrieve books from the top shelves. As they neared the end of the hall she was surprised to see several stacks of boxes.

"Before you ask, I had maintenance move the boxes from your office just before I came to get you." He nodded toward a large empty section of shelf. "This is where they need to be unloaded." He walked over to the boxes and looked at the label. "Excellent, the boxes are numbered, and they actually put them in the right order."

Serena walked over and peered down at the label. "Okay, that's easy enough."

Alex turned around and pointed to the top shelf. "You need to start unloading up there, and keep the volumes in chronological order. The month and years are on the outside binding." He gave her a narrow eyed look. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

Serena snorted. "If you're talking about mountain climbing in the Andes, then yes." She looked up at the shelf. "On a ladder with these shelves, hardly."

Alex laughed, and started to walk away. "Then I'll leave you to it, Ms. Dammler. I'm off to take my woman to dinner. Don't wait up."

Serena laughed. "No way would I wait up for your butt, boss." She ripped open the first box, grabbed a stack of books and headed up the ladder. The sounds of the law firm were comforting. There were people going in and out of the offices. The constant hum of voices along with the sound of a radio playing all blended together in a

pleasant drone. From her perch, she could see all the way to the receptionist's desk in the front of the building.

She had climbed the ladder to the top shelf for the third time when she suddenly felt tingles run down the back of her neck. The voices of her office mates suddenly quieted. Serena turned carefully on the ladder to glance down the hall and froze.

Walking slowly toward her was two of the most masculine men she'd ever seen. Her gaze raked over them hungrily. They each wore faded western shirts with lightweight jackets over dark denim jeans that molded to their thighs. Their cowboy boots were polished and glistened in the office light. Well-worn Stetson hats perched on top of their heads. Serena felt herself blush when she realized their heated gaze had locked onto her.

Serena swallowed hard when they reached the ladder and looked up. They waited silently for her to make the next move. Trembling, she turned to place the stack of books she held down on the shelf before climbing down. One of the smaller ones slid out of the stack and tumbled toward the floor. Without thinking, she made a grab for it. Her feet twisted on the rung as she turned and, suddenly, she was falling from the top. Before she could gather her breath to scream, warm, strong arms closed around her body.

Marc pulled her close against his chest and groaned. He placed a kiss behind her ear and whispered. "I told you we'd always be there to catch you when you fall, sunshine."

Serena looked into his dark brown eyes and shivered. She felt Tony come up close behind and press against her back. They had her sandwiched between them with her feet dangling off the floor, and she'd never felt so safe. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

Marc's face broke into a wicked grin. He sat her down on the floor. Before she could say anything, Tony scooped her up into his arms. He leaned down and covered her lips with his. Her gasp was all he needed for his tongue to plunge deep. For several long moments, he ravaged her mouth and then released her from the kiss.

Before she could say anything, Marc leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. Lightly, he sucked her bottom lip and then nipped lightly with his teeth. "We're here to claim you, sunshine." He took off his Stetson and placed it firmly on her head and smiled.

Tony hoisted her higher on his chest and then started walking down the hall with Marc close by his side.

As they neared the door she saw Alex standing off to one side grinning like a loon. He walked over and kissed her lightly on the cheek and handed her purse to Marc. "Be happy, Serena. You deserve it."

Marc held the door open and Tony walked out of Fenning, Ross and Levy with Serena clasped tightly against his chest.

* * * *

Serena walked into the hotel room and caught her breath. She'd never been anywhere so opulent. She found herself led into a sitting room. Two huge sectional sofas flanked a fireplace with a marble top mantle. A desk set to one side of the room with a laptop computer sitting on the top. One complete wall consisted of windows that spanned from the floor to the ceiling and the view was spectacular. There was a full bar in the corner with a mirrored wall behind it while a door at the side of the room remained closed and probably led to the bedroom.

Tony propelled her toward the couch and pushed her down into the soft cushions. "We need to talk, princess."

Serena took a deep breath. She already knew what she had to say. It was up to them whether they believed it or not. She gazed into Tony's eyes and then into Marc's. Taking a deep breath, she felt a calmness settle over her. She smiled. "I love you, both of you, so very much." She looked down at her hands and realized her fingers were trembling. "I know you probably think it's easy for me to say that because I found out about your money."

“No, sunshine, we don’t think that at all.” Marc sat next to her on the couch. “We never believed that even before Millie talked to us.”

“Millie talked to you about me?” Serena asked.

Tony snorted. “Yeah, I’ll say.” He grinned. “I’ve never had a woman willing to go to work so I could have satellite television. If I hadn’t already been in love with you then, that would have brought me over.”

“You really love me,” she said in awe.

“Darlin’, of course we do.” Tony pushed the hair away from her face. “I’m just so sorry we never told you sooner.”

Serena swallowed hard and clasped her hands together. “Why did you lie to me?”

“Shit.” Marc groaned and then gave her a sheepish grin. “Sorry, it’s just so damn stupid.”

“We were asses,” Tony announced.

“Exactly,” Marc agreed. “I admit we’d heard the rumors about you when you were in the hospital in Oregon, and it made us a little uncomfortable.”

Serena gave him a wry look. “A little uncomfortable? Be honest, guys. It scared you shitless.”

Marc laughed. “All right, you got me there.” His smile morphed into a frown. “You have no idea how many women would have told us anything just to get close to the money we have.” He glanced at Tony. “We both felt something when we saw you lying in that hospital bed.”

“You felt sorry for me?” Serena asked in a small voice.

“God, no,” Tony declared. “Lusted after you is more like it. There was something about you even with all those bruises. We just wanted to make sure you liked us for us, and not for what we could give you.”

Serena laughed. “So let me get this straight. You decided to carry out this hoax before we even left Mountain Vista. You contacted the people on your ranch and let everybody in on the joke.”

“No.” Marc growled. “Not a joke. We told Jeremy about it, and he had to tell Kaylee enough to keep her from spilling the beans, but nobody else knew.” He leveled his gaze on her. “Nobody was laughing at you, Rena. I give you my solemn vow.”

She smiled. “I believe you. I’d already decided by the time I came here that I’d made a big mistake not telling you how I felt. When I stopped in Mountain Vista to pack up my things, Cass tried to hammer some sense into my feeble brain.” She felt her cheeks flush. “You’re probably going to be surprised when you get home.”

“I love surprises,” Tony drawled.

“Yeah, well, you’ll like this one.” She took a deep breath. “There should be a letter waiting for you when you get back.”

“When *we* get back, sunshine.” Marc raised her chin with his hand. “What kind of letter?”

She shrugged. “I guess you’d call it a love letter. I wanted to see if there was any chance for us to be together, so I wrote and told you everything.”

Marc smiled and got to his feet, pulling Serena with him. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and rocked gently back and forth. She could feel Tony press in close behind her.

“Rena, we both love you very much, and we want you to marry us.”

Marc’s words made Serena’s head spin. “I, um, I don’t know what to say.” She swallowed hard and pulled back from his arms. “I may only be a paralegal, but I’m pretty sure it’s against the law to have more than one husband.”

Marc laughed and hugged her closer. “You’re right. Legally, it’s not possible, but that won’t stop us from having our own ceremony.”

Tony cleared his throat. “But legally.” He dropped down to one knee and looked up at her through his lashes. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my legal wife?”

Serena felt pole axed. She looked into his eyes and then up into Marc’s. “I don’t understand. Why would I need to be legally married

to anybody if we're going to have our own ceremony for the three of us?"

Tony grabbed her hand and pulled her closer. "It's what we want, princess. We want to make sure you're taken care of if anything happens to us." He glanced up at Marc. "We could leave wills and documents leaving everything to you, but unless we're legally married there would be somebody who'd find a way around it."

Marc turned her face so she looked at him. "We want you to marry Tony because he has the most to offer. We're equal partners in the ranch, but Tony also owns an oil company. If you're his wife, then you'll never have to worry about money again."

Serena felt her heartbeat race and tingles up and down her back. She took a deep breath and looked down at Tony. She leaned down and kissed his lips gently. "Yes, I'll marry you." She looked up at Marc. "I'll marry both of you." Startled, she turned quickly back to Tony when she felt him slide a ring onto her finger.

"Do you like it, princess?" he asked.

She stared at the ring he'd placed on her finger. A large blood-red ruby stood out predominantly in a yellow gold setting flanked by two princess cut diamonds. She'd never seen anything like it. "It's beautiful. I can't believe this. I feel like I must be dreaming."

Marc gave her a wicked grin. "Well, I think we can find ways to make you know you're not asleep." He glanced over at Tony. "What do you think, cowboy?"

"I think it's time to get this show on the road."

Marc moved closer and rubbed his cheek against hers as he began to unbutton her shirt. Serena could feel her pulse racing a mile a minute as she quivered with awareness. She breathed raggedly when he turned her around to face Tony and peeled the shirt down her arms. She shivered when Tony pressed featherlight kisses against her skin right before he bit lightly through the lace of her bra.

Tony raised his head and licked around the outer edges of her mouth, moistening her lips with his tongue. Threading his fingers

through her hair, he slanted his mouth over hers and took the kiss deep. Serena sucked lightly on his tongue as he kneaded her scalp with his fingers.

Marc's hands smoothed up her thighs, sliding beneath her short skirt. His fingers toyed lazily with her vaginal lips through the silky material before tunneling beneath her panties and brushing through the curls between her thighs.

"Damn, you're already so wet for me, sunshine." Marc nipped her ear lightly.

Tony pulled her skirt high above her waist and then slid his hands back down to her panties, which he began to slip off past her hips. Serena felt a tug from behind and then the rasp of a zipper right before her skirt dropped to the floor. Almost immediately, Tony opened the front fastening of her bra so Marc could drag it off her arms.

"Your skin is like silk, warm silk, and I want to feel every inch," Tony whispered.

"Um, guys?" She was standing between the two fully dressed men totally naked. "I'm feeling a little self-conscious here."

Tony laughed and then fumbled with the snaps on his shirt, pushing it over his shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. He popped the button on his jeans and then pushed them and his underwear down to the floor. His chest was nearly smooth with only a smidgeon of black hair trailing low on his stomach and ending in a thick nest around the base of his cock and balls. She licked her lips at the sight of his hard length and watched it twitch in response.

Both men moved in close, and Serena realized Marc had been stripping while she watched Tony. She felt a hard ridge press against her back at the same time a solid length of cock rested against her stomach. Her breasts flattened against Tony's chest as he crushed her to him, and she could feel their hearts beating against her back and chest.

"Let's move this to the bedroom," Tony suggested.

“Absolutely,” Marc agreed, scooping her into his arms. He walked over to the door by the bar and threw it open.

Serena got her first good look at the bedroom and gasped. It had the largest bed she’d ever seen sitting in the middle of the room.

“Damn, Marc. Where do you suppose we can get a bed this big for the ranch?” Tony asked.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll find out tomorrow.” He glanced down at Serena. “I’m thinking we might need to punish this woman for running away the way she did without talking to us first.” He grinned over at Tony. “You think we ought to turn her ass red for making us chase her all over the country?”

Chapter 13

“Nobody’s gonna turn my ass red unless they bend over for me to return the favor.” Serena glared up at the two large men. “Technically you did lie to me first.”

Tony chuckled. “You can’t argue with that logic, cowboy.” He brought his arms around her and cupped her breasts.

Marc buried his face into the crook of her neck as she fisted his erection in her hand. Tony’s large, warm hands began massaging her shoulders and back. He moved to her neck with his lips and nibbled at her throat. Moving south, he nipped at her shoulders, laving the small bites to soothe.

Leaning closer, Marc opened his mouth over hers and tasted her deeply. She parted her lips and allowed him to explore her mouth thoroughly. He grabbed her hands and placed them on his chest. “If you don’t slow down, I’ll never last, sunshine.”

Serena grinned and placed her hands tentatively on his shoulders and then moved them slowly down to his abdomen. She leaned close and placed nipping little love bites across the bulging muscles of his upper chest. The sound of his harsh groan was like music to her ears.

She pulled away and pointed toward the bed. “I want both of you to lie down, but leave just a little room for me between you.”

Marc glanced at Tony, and then both men rushed to do her bidding. Serena smiled and crawled up from the foot of the bed and knelt on the mattress between their hips. She cupped Marc intimately, running her fingers up his full length. Turning, she moved her hand to the hard head of Tony’s shaft, palming him.

“You’re killing me, babe.” Tony growled.

Serena bent low and lowered her lips over the head of Tony's cock and then quickly slid her tongue up and down the hard length. "Oh, God," he moaned.

She squeezed the base of Marc's shaft and slowly moved her hand up and down in gentle strokes. "Suck my cock, baby. I wanna feel your lips sliding over me bad," Marc begged. She leaned forward and swiped her tongue across the tip, learning his sweet, salty taste. Marc shuddered. "Take me in your mouth, please." He ran his fingers through her hair. Sucking the head, she ran her hand around his shaft and pumped it up and down.

Abandoning Marc, she turned to Tony and took hold of his cock at the base. Leaning forward, she took his length in her mouth, her teeth gently scraping against the satiny head. "Suck me," he pleaded. "Open your mouth and suck my cock." He moaned, his hands reaching for her shoulders.

She started when Marc rose up and locked his arms around her, licking just below her ear. "I can't take this kind of torture, baby. At this rate you could keep us on edge all night and never let us come."

She grinned and placed a sucking kiss at the end of Tony's shaft. "Would I do that?" she asked saucily.

Both men growled and pulled her down to the mattress. They flipped her to her back and attacked from both sides. Marc captured one of her nipples in the moist, warm suction of his lips while Tony cupped the underside of her other breast and squeezed before fondling and pinching the nipple teasing it into hardness. Tony moved, shifting lower on her body, and then circled her tight nipple with his tongue. Serena moaned and arched her taut breasts toward the two men.

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Marc released her nipple and moved to kneel on the bed. He leaned over Serena's body and whispered. "No man has ever taken the time to worship your body the way it deserves." He noticed her

shaking, trembling limbs. “Tonight, we’re going to show you what you’ve been missing.” He leaned forward and smiled as she parted her lips to receive his kiss. He ran his tongue over her full lips and plucked at them before plunging inside.

Marc let his hand wander down and play with the soft curls at the top of her mound. “Spread your legs, sunshine,” he whispered. He scooted down and swirled his tongue inside her bellybutton. Serena moaned and opened her legs wider. He looked up in time to see her part her lips and accept Tony’s tongue in a carnal kiss.

Marc placed his hands on her inner thighs, spreading her even wider. He let his fingers part the petals of flesh and slid one large finger along her cleft, letting his nail trail across her clit. She groaned and bucked wildly, her fingers gripping in his hair. Grinning, he scooted even lower on the bed. His fingertips once again slipped between her pussy lips, spreading her open and gently rubbing the slick flesh of her clit.

His gaze focused on her open pussy, moist and glistening. With his hands spreading her lips apart, he let his tongue delve inside, quickly licking the length of her slit teasing her clit. “Sunshine, you taste even better than you smell.”

“Don’t stop, please,” she cried.

Marc’s tongue moved to lick at her clit and he used his fingers to pull back the hood. He laved the pulsing bundle of nerves between her legs with the flat of his tongue while he pushed first one and then another finger inside her wet core.

“Please, I need to come,” she begged.

“Patience, sunshine. I think Tony needs a chance to taste this sweet pussy.” He looked up at his partner. “What about it, lover? Wanna taste?”

* * * *

Tony leaned forward and kissed Marc deeply, almost savagely, as he slipped his hand between their bodies and traced the cleft of Serena's slit. He leaned back and licked his lips. "Damn, the taste of the two of you together is hot." He turned to stare down at Serena. "But I wanna taste it directly from the source."

Tony kissed a trail down her smooth stomach while his fingers invaded her pussy, moving over her mound, slipping between her lower lips and caressing her swollen clit. He pinched the little nub between his thumb and forefinger and tugged, watching the honey pour from her opening. One of her legs lifted sensuously and rested on his shoulder.

"You're so fucking responsive," he groaned. He lowered his mouth to her moist pussy and licked her from anus to clit.

Her leg tightened on his shoulder as she cried out. "Tony!"

Chuckling, he licked her sweet pussy again while he penetrated her with one finger. The taste of her caused his cock to harden even more, and he savored her unique flavor. Wanting to end her suffering, he concentrated on her clit. Taking the tiny bud between his lips he alternated sucking and licking until she was literally writhing beneath him. Continuing his assault, he soaked his finger in her juices and trailed it down to her anus. Keeping her attention on her approaching orgasm, he carefully inserted the lubricated finger into her rectum. The extra pressure sent her over the edge.

Serena screamed out his name, and her body bowed so far off the bed only her head and feet were touching. Tony continued to lick her through the aftershocks, his finger pumping in and out of the tiny opening.

"Oh, God," Serena moaned. "What are you doing?"

"Just loving you, princess. Don't you like it?"

"I, um." Her entire body tensed.

Slowly Tony slid his finger out of her ass. He crawled up her body scooping her into a tight embrace and covered her mouth in a deep

kiss. “Princess, we’ll never expect you to do something you don’t like.”

Serena bit her lip. “I want us to all make love together, but I’m scared it’ll hurt.”

Marc leaned in close. “We’ve got the rest of our lives to try new things. We don’t have to do everything in one night. Hell, there’s no law that says we ever have to do it.”

“How will be able to make love all together if I can’t get over my fear?”

Tony groaned. “Princess, I know this is something that’s bothering you but right now, there’s something bothering me more.”

Her eyes got big. “What’s wrong?”

He took her hand and placed it on his throbbing erection and winked. “Not all of us have gotten off yet.”

“Actually, I have an idea about all of us making love together.” Marc looked at Tony and smiled. “You’re gonna fuck our little darlin’ while I fuck you.”

Tony grinned. “I can get behind that.” He nodded toward the table. “Hand me a condom.”

“Wait,” Serena said. “You guys don’t use condoms with each other, and I don’t want you to use them on me.”

Tony exchanged a surprised look with Marc and then turned his attention back to Serena. “Rena, are you sure?”

“You guys are clean, or you wouldn’t leave the condoms off each other. Well, the hospital tested me, and I’m clean, too. I’ve been on the pill for a couple of years, so we don’t have to worry about pregnancy.”

Tony let his smile take over his face. “You heard the lady. How do you want to do this, cowboy?”

“You go ahead and get started, and I’ll be right back.” Marc got up and walked toward the sitting room.

Tony gave Serena a wicked look and grabbed the back of her thighs, pulling her legs up. He laughed when she squealed and tried to

wriggle away. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she drew him inside when the tip of his erection grazed her slick opening. With one thrust, Tony sheathed his cock to the hilt inside her pussy. He leaned forward, running his lips along her jaw and down the hollow of her throat. Tony raised his head. With their gazes locked, he pulled back and surged inside her body once again.

“Sorry, guys, but that won’t work.” Marc came back holding one of the chair cushions in his hand. “You need to be on your back, Tony. Let our woman ride you.”

Tony glanced at Serena and shrugged before pulling free of her body. He lay on his back and urged her to climb on top. He put his hands around her waist and lifted her up over his abdomen. Her hands clenched against his stomach as he lowered her over his rigid shaft, slowly impaling her. Catching her buttocks in his hands, Tony arched upward, sinking more deeply still. For several moments, he withdrew and then pushed in again in rough, jerky motions while her hips ground against him.

Tony gritted his teeth and looked over her shoulder at Marc. “Now what, genius?”

Marc laughed and climbed onto the bed behind Serena and moved up between Tony’s spread legs. “You’re going to use your legs and lift your ass up off the bed so I can get this pillow under you.”

Tony grinned and looked at him with dawning comprehension. “I get it.” He smiled up at Serena. “Hold on, princess. This is gonna make you think you really are out for a ride.” He held onto Serena’s waist and used his legs to push up, lifting his ass and Serena into the air. He felt Marc slip the firm pillow under his ass when Serena screeched and dug into his arms with her nails. “You all right, princess?”

She giggled. “You didn’t tell me I’d be riding a bucking bronco, cowboy.”

* * * *

Marc smirked and moved closer to Serena's back. He grinned when she wiggled her bottom to entice him. He was hard enough to pound nails now. He didn't need any special encouragement. She groaned when he ran his hands down her back to cup her soft buttocks. One of his hands slipped down and caressed the firm cheeks of Tony's ass, comparing the texture of his two lovers. Gently he squeezed both perfect ass cheeks.

Marc leaned forward and let his tongue slide across the smooth skin of Serena's shoulder while he hand palmed the cheeks of Tony's ass, his thumbs sliding between the round globes to brush against his hole. He leaned forward and placed his mouth next to Serena's ear. "Lean forward, sunshine. Rub those gorgeous breasts of yours against his chest and let him feel those pointy little nipples." He could hear her breath catch as she leaned forward to obey his commands.

"Hurry up, man," Tony begged. "Her pussy's clenching my cock like a vise. She keeps squeezing them inner walls. Hell, I'm gonna come before you even get in if you don't hurry."

Marc smacked Serena's left ass check when he heard her giggle. "Your job is to keep him from coming until I'm ready, sunshine." He leaned close to her ear. "I'll make it easy for you. If he comes before I'm ready"—he licked her ear—"then you don't." He grinned when he heard her gasp.

Marc grabbed the tube of lube he'd left at the foot of the bed and squirted it on his fingers.

"Wait," Serena cried.

Marc froze and stared at Tony over her shoulder. "What's wrong, darlin'?"

Serena took a deep breath and then turned and gave Marc a small smile. "I want both of you inside me."

Marc heard Tony's breath catch at Serena's admission. He met her unwavering gaze for just a moment and then pressed a kiss against her lips. "Are you sure, sunshine?"

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.” She swallowed hard. “Just promise me you’ll take things slow and easy.”

“Absolutely! We’ll never do anything to hurt you intentionally, darlin’. Just try to relax and tell me if you want me to stop.”

“Okay,” she said, a small smile decorating her face. Slowly she turned back around to face Tony.

He placed a slickened finger at Serena’s tight hole and pressed, letting her ass suck his finger in. Carefully, he added a second finger and felt her tense up. “Relax, sunshine. Push back against my fingers if you can.”

She groaned harshly. “I’m trying but it burns.”

“Do you want him to stop?” Tony asked, cupping her cheek in his palm.

“No,” she cried out. “Don’t you dare stop!”

Chuckling, he slid a third finger in and began scissoring them to open his lover up, stretching the tight ring. “Oh, God, it feels so good.” Serena wiggled her ass against his fingers.

“Well, darlin’, I think you’re ready.” He leaned forward and glanced down at Tony. “What about you, cowboy?”

“I’m ready, damn it.” Tony growled.

Marc laughed and coated his cock with the slippery lube. Moving closer, he lined up his throbbing shaft with Serena’s opening and slowly pushed inside. He pulled back and pushed in a couple more times until his balls rested against her ass.

“Holy shit. It feels awesome. I can feel you sliding against my cock.” Tony was practically purring.

“Are you okay, sunshine?” Marc asked.

“Fantastic,” she gasped. “Now, start moving.”

Marc began pumping in and out in a steady rhythm. He put his hands on Serena’s waist and helped to lift her in an up and down motion on Tony’s cock that matched his strokes.

“Fuck, cowboy, she’s so damn tight.” Marc closed his eyes and threw his head back, enjoying the feel of his cock sliding back and forth along Tony’s shaft inside her body.

“So good.” Tony moaned.

He picked up the speed and felt Tony’s hands join his on Serena’s waist. When he felt his balls drawing up he reached around to search between her legs for her clit. Finding the little magic button, he gave it a few flicks and sent her into a screaming orgasm. That was all it took for him. His body seized and he came, hot streams of semen jetting inside his lover’s body. He was vaguely aware of Tony bucking and crying out as he spilled inside their woman.

Marc withdrew from Serena’s warmth and pulled her off Tony’s softening cock. He left her cuddling next to Tony while he went and got some warm rags to clean everyone up. When he finished, Marc joined them on the bed, tangling their legs together. They moved around her, almost surrounding her for sleep. They lay together, Tony’s head on her breast and Marc’s hand on her lower body. He felt like they belonged together.

“Do you think it’ll get any better than this?” Serena asked.

Marc rubbed his hand across her pussy. “Sunshine, it’ll just get better and better.”

Tony groaned. “I’m a dead man!”

Epilogue

“It was a beautiful ceremony, Serena. Or should I call you Rena?” Cass asked with a smirk.

Serena laughed. “Rena’s fine, just don’t call me sunshine or princess. I’ve just about broken Marc and Tony from referring to me with those ridiculous nicknames. I’d hate for them to hear somebody else using them and start back up again.”

Cass snickered. “It could be worse.”

“Don’t I know it,” Serena groaned. “I wanted to tell you how much it means to me that the three of you came all this way for my wedding. Especially after all the trouble I caused for you.”

“Oh, honey, you didn’t cause me any trouble. Actually, you were on the receiving end for most of the trouble. Besides,” she grinned, “it’s pretty hard to say no to a wedding invitation that comes with a private jet.”

“Yeah, my guys really know how to make a lasting impression.”

“Hey, pretty lady. Do I get to kiss the bride?”

Serena smiled up into the face of their ranch foreman. “As long as it’s one of those pecks on the cheek, Jeremy. You know how jealous Tony gets.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I believe he’s mentioned it a time or two.” He bent and kissed her on the cheek. “I wish you and the guys all the happiness in the world, Rena.”

“Thanks, Jeremy. That means a lot to me.” She turned to Cass. “Have you met my friend Cass? She and her husbands live in Mountain Vista, my hometown.”

“Pleased to meet you, young lady.”

“Rena? Marc and Tony said to tell you to hustle your butt. It’s time to go.” Kaylee grinned up at her glowering father with an innocent expression on her face. “What? I’m just repeating the message.”

He frowned and turned to Cass. “This rather rambunctious young lady is my daughter, Kaylee.”

“Come on, Dad. Cass has been here for several days. We’ve already met.”

Marc came walking up with a purposeful stride. “Woman, didn’t you get our message? It’s time to leave.” He started pulling her toward the door.

Serena heard someone yell for her to throw the bouquet. Pulling her arm free from Marc’s grasp, she tossed the small bunch of flowers over her shoulder and then turned to see who caught it. With a wide grin, she watched Kaylee execute a jump that would have made Magic Johnson envious and clutch her prize to her chest. The room got suddenly quiet and she clearly heard their ranch foreman.

“Son of a—”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I was born, and raised in the great southern state of Tennessee. In my youth, I studied nursing, and spent several happy years working in the hospitals there until I branched out into medical management in 1980.

In 1998 I was managing a medical supply house in Chattanooga, when I met the love of my life. The only problem facing me then, he lived way out in Oklahoma. You see, we had met in a chat room!

He romanced me daily with love letters, flowers and phone calls. It wasn't long before I uprooted myself, and moved west to join him. We married in 1999, and then continued our fantasy romance all over the world. Together we have traveled in almost all of the Continental United States, and taken trips to Canada and China.

I retired from working in 2002 and it wasn't long before my husband was encouraging me to find some kind of outlet to occupy my time, something that was challenging, and rewarding. I was already obsessed with reading about romance, and I began to think I could probably write a good, romantic story. My husband heartily agreed with me. With that encouragement, I began writing my first book. I wasn't really convinced that anyone else would find it interesting, but he pressed me to take a chance and send it in to a publisher. To my surprise, it was accepted, and now I'm able to share it with readers everywhere who like a "happily ever after" story.

Today, I'm living in California with my, still romantic, husband of twelve years, and our boys. Our boys consist of Beau, Midnight, and Bubba, three male cats that allow us to live with them and serve them at their leisure. I continue to write almost daily, hoping that someone, somewhere will get the same enjoyment from reading my stories, that I get from writing them.

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