



A
RANCHER'S
Promise

MARIE ROCHELLE

A Rancher's Promise

A novel of erotic romance by

Marie Rochelle

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Chapter One

Stuart Houston stared at his angry older brother. “Kyle, I’m your brother. I know I haven’t been around for a while, but we need your help. We don’t have any other place to go. You’re my family which means you’re supposed to help me.”

Kyle snorted and shook his head. “First, I helped you enough when you lived here. I think I finished my brotherly duties a long time ago. Secondly, why in the hell are you saying we when you’re the only person I’m looking at? Have you lost your mind or something?”

Kyle Houston knew that his brother was always up to something even when they were kids, but he never thought Stuart would lose his mind.

“I’m just as sane as you. I’m a lot of things, but crazy isn’t one of them,” Stuart snapped at him.

“So, if you aren’t crazy what are you talking about?” Kyle demanded. “I still don’t know why you’re saying ‘we.’”

Stuart glanced over his shoulder and waved at someone. “Come on, I want you to meet my brother. I swear his bark is worse than his bite. He can be a mean SOB, but he wouldn’t toss us out on the street. He has enough room in this house for everyone in town to spend the night.”

Kyle waited to see who in the hell Stuart had brought to his house. He loved the peace and quiet living out in rural Colorado gave him. He had made his home out here for a reason and having unwanted visitors wasn’t one of them.

“Here she comes,” Stuart said, taking a quick look back at him.

Kyle eyes widened in shock as the person his brother was talking to came and stood next to him. The woman was truly breathtaking. She was around five feet five inches tall with huge dark brown eyes and her skin reminded him of melted chocolate, the kind a person poured over a hot fudge sundae. He couldn’t help but stare because he was at a loss for words. However, the reality of the situation slowly started to set in. If this gorgeous woman was with Stuart then she had to lead the same lifestyle.

“Who in the hell is this and why did you bring her to my house?” Kyle demanded. “I don’t have time for any kind of trouble from you. You know this is the biggest time of the year for me at the ranch.”

“Kyle, meet Amerie Palmer. Amerie, this is my older and much crankier brother Kyle Houston,” Stuart said, making the introductions.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Houston,” Amerie said in a soft voice that made his body instantly respond. *Hell no!* He wasn’t going to let Stuart and this woman stay with him. He had to find a way to get rid of both of them.

He gave Amerie a brief glance over before looking back at Stuart. “How do you know her? She doesn’t seem like the type of girl you usually hang around or hook-up with. What does she have to offer you?”

“Kyle, Amerie is my friend and we need your help. She’s in danger and this is the only place I could think of to keep us safe.”

“What kind of danger has she gotten you into? Is it something illegal? I don’t need that shit following her here to the ranch with what I already having going on.”

“Why are you being such a ba...?” Stuart started to say but was interrupted by Amerie.

“Stuart, forget it,” she said, glaring at Kyle. “I’d rather deal with what we’re running from than your brother. He doesn’t want me here, so I’m leaving.” Stepping off the porch, Amerie stormed away, a cloud of dust blowing up behind her.

“Are you really going to toss us in the street?” Stuart demanded. “Amerie risked a lot to help me. I swore to her that I would take her somewhere safe and now you’re making me into a liar.”

Kyle didn’t want to admit it, but he was impressed with how Amerie didn’t beg for his help, but stalked off instead. It showed him that she had a backbone. A quality he’d found lacking in the women he’d been dating.

“Fine, go and get your friend. I can’t waste any more time with the two of you,” he complained, brushing past Stuart. “Your bedroom is still the same and the guestroom’s bed should have clean sheets. Show Amerie around and then I want to speak with you after you’re finished getting settled in. You’re going to tell me what in the hell is going on. I don’t care if it takes all night to get it out of you.”

Stuart watched as Kyle headed for the stables before he spun on his heel and went after Amerie. “Amerie wait up. You’re walking too fast,” he yelled worried that she would make it to the main road before he caught up with her. “Kyle is going to let us stay. Everything will be okay.”

“You stay here with him. I can find a place in town to stay. I don’t have time for his attitude or smart ass mouth. I got that enough from you know who. I won’t let it happen to me here and not with him!”

Running the last few steps, Stuart caught Amerie by the arm and twirled her back around. “God, will you please stop. I’m an old guy. I can’t keep up with the pace you’re going.”

Amerie looked at his hand on her arm then back at his face. “Let go of my arm.”

Slowly, he released Amerie, hoping that he wasn’t making a mistake. She was in such a fit that she might truly leave him here and walk all the way back to town. “Kyle agreed to let us stay here. We need to get back to the house. I want you to be safe and us standing out here in the open like this isn’t helping at all. Please come back with me. You know that he’ll be searching for us the second he realizes we’re gone. He’ll be even more pissed that you helped me escape. You know how much I hated leaving your mother back there with them, but I had to get you someplace safe first. She would have told me to do the same thing. Now, are we going to fight about this more or will you listen to me. You helped me, so please let me return the favor.”

Amerie eyed him like she wanted to disagree, but instead she brushed past him. “Let’s go, but I’m making you promise that if Kyle says one thing I don’t like I can leave without a word from you. He doesn’t have the right to talk to me anyway that he wants to.”

“Fair enough,” Stuart agreed as he walked beside Amerie back to the ranch. “I’ll help you get your stuff in the guestroom and then I’ll have the cook fix us something to eat. He can make a mean double cheeseburger with French fries. How does that sound to you?”

“Can I get onions on my burger? If so, I think I’m already to eat anytime you are,” she answered and then grinned at him.

“I’m sure I can get that added for you.”

“Will your brother be joining us?”

“No, Kyle is checking on the horses. So he’ll be away probably for most of the afternoon. We’re going to be eating alone. Why?”

“Good,” Amerie retorted. “I want to be able to eat my food in peace and not be fighting the urge to throw my food at him.”

Stuart decided to keep his comment to himself, but he hoped that Amerie didn’t see the smile that spread across his face. He was right. Amerie was going to be a perfect addition to this place and to Kyle’s life more than the two of them realized.

Chapter Two

Easing down the dark hallway, Stuart made his way slowly down the steps making sure not to wake the sleeping people inside the house. He inched his way towards the front door and was about to unlock it when a voice behind him startled him.

“Where in the hell do you think you’re going in the middle of the night?” Kyle demanded turning on the living room light.

“I’m leaving,” Stuart answered honestly as he spun around. “I have to get out of here as fast as possible. Someone else needs my help and I have to go to her.”

“So, you were planning on leaving your little girlfriend here with me? What was I supposed to tell her when she woke up in the morning and asked about you? I’m not a baby sitter. Go wake her up and take her with you.”

“No, I can’t take her. If she goes with me she might not stay alive. Kyle, if you have ever loved me you will let Amerie stay here with you. Please do this for me. For once, I’m not thinking about my wants and needs but someone else. Amerie can’t stay with me. She needs a safe place and I couldn’t think of a more secure place than here. Can’t you do this one thing for me?”

“Who are you hiding from? Let me help you. I’ve never seen you like this before and I’m worried about you. I don’t like the feeling I’m getting from you. Something is going on with you. Tell me what it is so I can help you. I can’t let you sneak off in the middle of the night without informing me what has you so scared.”

Stuart shook his head. “No, I don’t need you to help me, but you can make this easier for me by watching after Amerie. She has to stay here with you on the ranch. She saved my life and now it’s my turn to return the favor. She wouldn’t need a place to hide if it wasn’t for me.”

Kyle was really troubled about Stuart now after hearing his speech. He wanted to know what in the hell was going on. Why was Stuart trying to leave a woman with him that he didn’t know? His brother was hiding something big and he was going to get to the bottom of it right now.

“Tell me what you’ve gone and gotten yourself into? I can help you, but if you leave I have no way of doing it.” He’d been mad at Stuart for always going down the wrong path. At thirty-one his brother should have his life under control, but he didn’t and probably never would. It had been this way since they were children.

“I’m not going to get into this now. I really have to get out of here before I bring more trouble than either one of you need. Please just take care of Amerie. She’s a very special woman and try to remember that when you get into one of your moods.” Stuart unlocked the door and rushed out before Kyle was able to stop him.

“Wait!” Kyle yelled after the initial shock had worn off. He chased after Stuart catching him before he got inside his car at the end of the driveway. “You aren’t leaving until I get some answers.”

“Kyle, for once in your life can you please just not have to know everything? I can’t tell you anything else. The only thing you need to know is that I might not be back for a while and you can’t let Amerie leave here. She can be very stubborn sometimes, but she uses that to hide her pain. Even when she needs help she will fight with everything she has in her not to ask for it.”

“I don’t have time to look after Amerie. She came across to me like a very intelligent and independent woman. Don’t you think she might be pissed as hell when she finds out you abandoned her here with your overly controlling brother? She might actually leave and try to find you herself. Did that thought ever enter your mind? Or were you too busy trying to get away from whatever trouble you are in and going to another woman?”

Kyle was determined to find out what was going on. He didn’t have time to be blindsided by anything. He had too many people depending on him to get things done at the ranch. He couldn’t add his brother’s problems on top of his own.

Stuart grabbed him by the arm and glared into his face. “You can’t let her try to find me. Do whatever you can to stop her. I won’t ever forgive you if she ends up in worse trouble. Do you understand me Kyle?”

Jerking his arm away, Kyle calmed his temper down before he hit the hell out of his brother. No man had the right to manhandle him like that, not even his own baby brother. “I’m going to let that go because you’re upset, but don’t ever grab me like that again. You know how I feel about being touched.”

“I’m sorry,” Stuart apologized, stepping back from him. “I lost it for a minute there. I swear it won’t happen again. I only wanted to make you understand what I was telling you.”

“I can hear fine. I know that you want your girlfriend to stay here with me, but you aren’t giving me the entire story. That is what is upsetting me. I promise whatever trouble you’re in I can get you out of it. “Just be honest with me. Isn’t that all I have ever asked of you even when we were younger. The more honest you are the better chance I have of getting you out of any situation you might have caused for yourself.”

His brother paused giving him a wary look and it made the feeling he already had get twenty times worst. “Kyle, this is one time that I have to clean up my own mess. Amerie helped me more than you know. You keep saying she’s my girlfriend, but she isn’t. She’s the best friend I have ever had and I’m going to show her how much our friendship means to me. So, if she asks about me in the morning and wonders where in the hell I went, tell her what I just told you and she’ll understand.”

Backing away from his brother, Kyle stood to the side as Stuart got into his car and sped off. He watched his brother’s car until he couldn’t see the tail lights anymore. He couldn’t believe that after all of these years Stuart was trying to take responsibility for his mistakes.

The situation pleased and shocked him at the same time. He was proud Stuart wanted to handle his own problems, but stunned that Stuart wanted to do it now when his tribulations seemed so out of hand.

What in the hell was going on between his brother and Amerie? What was the two of them hiding?

Chapter Three

“Do you know where Stuart is?” Kyle stopped walking towards the stables and Amerie moved in front of him blocking his path. “I checked his room this morning and it was empty. I even looked around outside and noticed his car was gone. Did he go into town for something? I need to talk to him.”

Kyle had hoped to avoid her until he was ready to tell her that Stuart had left her here with him. He had stayed up most of the night trying to figure out how he was going to handle Ms. Palmer if she decided to leave. Stuart wanted her here with him and he was going to keep his word despite the fact the woman in front of him rubbed him the wrong way.

“My brother isn’t here,” he answered moving around Amerie’s body. The light scent of peaches and cream filled his nose as he went around her. He didn’t have time to get sidetrack by a pretty face and knockout body.

Amerie was probably used to using her looks to get what she wanted, but it wasn’t going to work with him. He had a business to run at his ranch and being a babysitter to a twenty-something woman wasn’t in his job description.

“Are you going to tell me where he is?” Amerie asked, stepping back in front of him. “I need to talk to him. It’s very important and it can’t wait.”

Kyle tried not to notice how good Amerie looked in her white t-shirt and blue jeans, but she possessed the kind of body that had most men hard from the moment she walked into the room. However, he wasn’t interested in his brother’s leftovers. He wasn’t going to believe that Stuart hadn’t slept with this beauty in front of him.

Stuart was known for constantly having a stunning woman on his arm and Amerie was no exception. She would be attracted to his brother way more than him. When it came to the looks department Stuart got them plus twenty and he was blessed with the brains. He learned to accept his lack of good looks a long time ago.

“He’s gone,” he replied, hoping that this would be the end of the conversation so he could get busy with what he had to get done.

“I know. You already told me that. I want to know when he’ll be back here. “

“He isn’t coming back. He left late last night while you were upstairs asleep. I told him to wake you up, but he said no. He wants you to stay here with me. I told him no, but my brother has never been one to listen to what anyone has to tell him.” Kyle brushed past Amerie trying not to notice the shocked look on her pretty face.

“He wouldn’t do that. Stuart told me that we were a team and would stick together,” Amerie yelled after him. “He knows better than to leave me here with you! I know you don’t want me here either.”

Instead of answering her, Kyle continued into the barn to check on the horse. One of his prized mares was pregnant and he wanted to make sure that everything was going okay with her. This was her first foal and she wasn’t allowing too many people besides himself around her. He had bought her from an abusive owner and it had taken awhile, but she finally formed a bond with him after a couple of weeks.

Going to the very back of the barn, he stopped at the stable door watching how the mare was slowly pacing around. The Appaloosa mare was due in a couple of weeks and Kyle was nervous about the delivery. This was the first time he had ever mated this mare with another horse and he was worried about how the foal might turn out. Sofia was a calm mature mare, but being pregnant had made her a little more on edge as she neared the end of her pregnancy so he checked on her more now during the day.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Kyle said, going into the stall. “How are you doing today?” He ran his hand down her muzzle trying to calm Sofia down. He hated to see her so stressed out. He had thought about not mating her again since this first pregnancy was giving her so much discomfort. “What a beautiful horse. What is her name,” a feminine voice asked him from outside of the stall. He didn’t even have to guess who it was.

“Ms. Palmer, what are you doing in here?” Kyle asked looking at Amerie. He hated how his pulse kicked up at the sight of her. She had a beauty about her that would make any man stand up and take notice.

“Did you really think I was going to let you walk away from me? I asked you a question and you didn’t answer me, so I had to follow you.”

“I don’t have an answer for your question, so why don’t you find something to do with your time besides bother me?”

Crossing her arms over her breasts, Amerie eyed him like he hadn't said a word to her. "You're lying to me and I'm not going to leave until I get an answer. Where is Stuart? You have to know where he is. I'm worried about him. I don't want him to do anything stupid."

Kyle patted Sofia one last time before he left the stall. Amerie demonstrated the main reason why he didn't like to have a lot of women on his ranch. They were too damn insistent all of the time especially the ones who looked like the woman demanding answers he wasn't ready to give.

"Listen, I'm not lying to you when I tell you that I don't know where my brother is. I caught him last night sneaking out of the house. I told him to take you with him, but he swore that you would be safer here with me than with him. So, you probably have a better chance at knowing where my fly-by-night brother is than I ever will. Are you happy now?" he inquired, in a harsh voice.

"Stuart is gone?" She whispered, softly like the reality of the situation was starting to sink in. "He can't be gone. He promised me that we would stay together until all of this was over. No, I don't believe you."

Kyle didn't want to get into another long discussion with Amerie about his wayward brother, but he was beginning to see that Stuart had used the poor girl and dumped her on him. He would let her stay a couple of extra days and then find a way to get rid of her.

"You must not know my brother that well. He doesn't know how to stick with anything. Once he is done with you, he'll toss you to the side. I'm sorry you got caught up with him, but I can't make him come back for you. Hopefully, you'll be able to get over him."

Rushing up to him, Amerie poked him in the chest with her index finger. "You have no clue what your brother has been through these last couple of weeks. We don't have a sexual relationship and never will. Stuart is like the big brother that I have always wanted," she snapped at him.

Kyle wrapped his hand around Amerie's small wrist trying to ignore how soft and perfect her rich brown skin was. He wasn't going to get himself get dragged into whatever situation his little brother had caused for himself. He had offered to help Stuart and he got turned now. He wasn't about to make a fool of himself a second time.

"I advice you not to get upset with me, Ms. Palmer," he warned in a low voice. "I have a very low tolerance for bossy women and you have to

be at the top of that list.” Kyle dropped Amerie’s hand and stared at her waiting for a reaction he knew was sure to come.

“Bossy...” she sputtered, rubbing the spot where his hand had just been. “I’m not bossy. I’m direct and if you have a problem with it so be it.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but clamped it shut. Taking the Stetson off his head, Kyle ran his fingers through his thick hair. He hadn’t been around a woman so....hell he didn’t know what to say about Amerie. He only knew that he had to keep his distance away from her or he wouldn’t be responsible for what might happen.

“I’m going to leave again and this time I advise you not to follow me. Do you understand?”

Sienna colored eyes narrowed at him and Kyle had to keep from smiling. He would give Amerie credit; she was a spunky little something. Totally not the type his brother would go for so he was more than envious Stuart found such a keeper and decided to abandon her with him.

“I hear you.”

“Good, now you’re more than welcome to look around the property, but don’t go past the white fence at the far field. I keep my prize bull out there and he hates strangers. So stay away from him.”

“I won’t go out there, but why is he so far away from the rest of your ranch.”

“Creed is like me. He would rather be left alone to do his own thing instead of having people fussing over him.”

Amerie stared at him for a few minutes without saying a word and it was making him uncomfortable. He hated to be looked at like that. It made him more aware of his lack of good looks. He wasn’t about to stand here and let Stuart’s ex-girlfriend point out why no woman would make a fuss over him.

“Don’t forget what I told you,” Kyle warned before he strolled from the barn leaving Amerie alone inside.

Amerie couldn’t take her eyes off Kyle as he stormed away leaving her alone inside of the barn. She couldn’t believe how different Stuart and his brother were when it came to their looks and personalities. Stuart was so fun-loving, flirtatious and an all-around playboy. However, Kyle was dark and brooding like he had a weight on his wide shoulders.

What she didn't understand was why Kyle thought she was Stuart's girlfriend? He wasn't the type of man she was attracted to at all. Sure, he had all of thick blond hair and baby blue eyes, but none of that stuff mattered to her.

Despite the fact he had been nothing but rude and nasty to her since she stepped foot on his front porch, Kyle had drawn her attention instantly. No, he wasn't blessed with the perfect looks of his baby brother; he had something better going on....sex appeal.

She wouldn't say that he was completely unattractive, but rather had the look of a bad guy from the old western movies her grandmother loved watching. He looked like the type of man who would know how to please a woman in bed for hours and hours.

Her mouth had gone dry at the sight of Kyle running his fingers through his thick chestnut hair. There had been so much of it that it had fallen across his forehead giving him a slightly rebellious look. God, she almost creamed her panties when his thick, long calloused fingers brushed against her wrists.

While he had been giving her a harsh lecture, all she could think about was how enjoyable his touch felt. What in the hell was wrong with her wanting a man who despised the sight of her? There was no way in hell that Kyle Houston wanted her anywhere near his bed let alone in it.

"Why do I always and I mean always end up being attracted to men who don't want a thing to do with me?" Amerie asked herself as she headed for the front of the barn.

Chapter Four

Amerie made it out of the barn in time to see Kyle's broad shoulders as he went around the back of the house. She had no clue where in the hell he was going but she was done with him for the day. She had to figure out why in the world Stuart left her here in the middle of nowhere by herself. She was in no way a country girl and she had *never* dreamt about becoming one.

However, Kyle's ranch was a huge difference from the environment she was raised in. Everywhere she looked around the vast property all of the workers seemed to be doing something or helping another person out. When it came to her family everyone was for themselves and if you weren't you learned how to take on that personality pretty quick.

Now, she shouldn't complain that her life had always been so horrific. She had an amazing childhood until her father died and her mother decided to remarry several years later. The day after her mother's wedding her life started going downhill all because of her new stepfather.

"Hello, pretty young thing. Do you need some help? I'll be more than happy to help you out." A masculine voice flirted behind her.

Spinning around, Amerie was taken back by the towering man standing behind her and took a step back from him. He was around six feet with thick, black hair and the coldest black eyes she had ever seen in her life.

Unconsciously she took two more steps back hoping that he wouldn't try to touch her in any way, shape or form. He totally looked like the kind of low life who would keep company with her stepfather. "No, thank you. I'm fine," she said quickly, secretly wondering how fast she could get away from him. "I don't need your help at all."

The guy flashed a sly grin that made her stomach get a little queasy. "You look a little lost to me. Are you sure that you don't need anything from me? Like I said, I love helping out a pretty woman." The words practically poured from his mouth like he wanted to take a bite out of her.

Hell would freeze over before she let this creep help her with anything, Amerie thought.

However, she couldn't say that, so she swallowed down her nasty comment and continued to try to be direct while thinking of a way to get herself as far away as she could from this obnoxious man.

"Thank you, but I'm fine. I was just looking around. I'm sure that you have more important thing to do today instead of wasting your time babysitting me."

The man took a step closer to her and she continued to move away from him. What in the hell was his problem? Did he not know how to take no for an answer? She didn't like the way his eyes raked over her body like he was undressing her. She needed to get back inside the house because she wasn't sure what was going on in his mind.

"Hmm...It was nice to meet you but I better go back inside," Amerie retorted.

"Aren't you the girl that Stuart dropped off here yesterday?" he asked, shocking her. "Some of the other ranch hands were talking about you last night. They said you were a good-looking girl, but they all lied. You're gorgeous. I would love to show you around the ranch later on today. I'm Walter Townsend by the way." His eyes continued to roam over her body like she was too dumb to even notice that he was doing it.

Amerie really wasn't up to making small talk with Walter now or any other day of the week because he made her skin crawl. He was the type of guy that a woman would look for any kind of excuse not to be around and try very hard to avoid. God, how many times did she have to tell him that she wasn't interested in being in his creepy presence?

"I'm not going to tell you no again," Amerie tossed out. "I'm pretty sure that there's some woman out there that would love for you to show her around, but she isn't me." She tried to reject as nicely as possible, but if he got into her face one more time then she was going to let him have it with both barrels. She learned a long time ago that sometimes a woman had to add a little vinegar to her sweetness to get the perfect combination of what she needed to get done.

Right now, she was dying for Walter to leave her alone so she could think about finding a way to leave this enormous ranch and Kyle in the past. This situation wasn't going to work out for her at all. Kyle hated her guts and wanted her gone. Hell, she wasn't too fond of staying here and getting to know his ass any better anyway.

"How do you know it isn't you until you go out on a date with me?" Walter inquired, pressing the issue. He looked at her with a smug expression that sent her temper soaring.

Amerie clenched her teeth. She was livid at this idiot standing in front of her not listening to a word that she was saying to him. It truly was going in one ear and out the other. "My answer isn't going to change," she spat tired of having the conversation. She had come out here to find Kyle to find out more about Stuart and he left her to deal with this walking gigolo.

Wait until she saw him! She was going to kill him!

"Walter, leave the lady alone," a voice cut in. "You know that Rachel isn't going to like hearing about how you were flirting with another woman. She's already still pissed from the other day when you forgot to take her to the doctor."

Amerie gaped as a tall, gorgeous hunk came and stood next to Walter. He was tall with dark brown hair cut close to his head and a five o'clock shadow covering his jaw line. Truly, he was handsome enough to be an actor if he wanted. He was almost as attractive as Stuart, but with a little more edge to his personality. He was such a.....? Hell, she couldn't think of a word to even describe him.

"Chuck, why don't you mind your own business and let me stay here with the new woman," Walter snapped.

"Do you really want Kyle to find out about this? I thought you loved being a part of the ranch. The last time you got into some trouble Kyle gave you a warning and told you that you would be out on your ass if you caused any kind of problem in future."

"I'm not bothering her," Walter said. "I was only talking to her. What is the big fucking deal about that?"

Chuck brought his huge hand down hard on Walter's shoulder and Amerie noticed how the older man flinched, but didn't say a word to Chuck about it. What in the hell was wrong with all of the guys at this place? She had to get out of here and the sooner the better.

"Why don't the two of you work out this disagreement between yourselves while I head back in?" Amerie made a mad dash for the house before either man could find a way to stop her.

Inside the entranceway of the spotless house, Amerie stopped in her tracks at the sight of Kyle standing there like he witnessed everything that had happened to her outside with Walter. He didn't seem the least upset one of his employees had been harassing her to no end.

“Did you see what he was doing to me?” she asked.

“Yes, I did,” Kyle replied, looking at her as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Why didn’t you come out there and help me like Chuck did?” Amerie demanded. “You had to have known he was getting on my nerves by the way I kept moving away from him.”

“I saw what was going on and I didn’t think it looked like you needed any help from me. Walter has a way that makes women want to be around him. I thought you were enjoying his company. You didn’t walk away from him and you had plenty of opportunity.”

Amerie was so livid that she almost slapped the taste out of Kyle’s mouth, but she calmed herself down because he was Stuart’s brother and she respected Stuart too much to do that. So, she was going to take a different approach with the brooding man in front of her. She was beginning to see that he liked pushing her buttons and she wasn’t going to fall for it anymore.

“Mr. Houston, I don’t know what your problem is with me,” Amerie said, moving closer to him until she was standing directly in front of his towering frame, “but I’m going to find a way to make you like me as much as Stuart does or maybe more.”

“Try all that you want, Miss Palmer, but I’m not going to fall all over you like Stuart or Walter does. I don’t think my brother should have left you here. I’m not a babysitter. I can’t keep an eye on you twenty-four seven. My men need to work and you are a distraction they don’t need at the moment. So, try to stay away from the areas where they’re working.”

“Are you saying that I only have my looks and have nothing else going on for me?” Amerie asked stunned by Kyle’s rudeness. She truly was fighting to stay composed, but Kyle was pushing her last button and she was about to lose her temper. She might not be able to keep the promise she just made to herself about telling him to kiss her ass.

“Don’t take it as an insult. My brother usually falls for those types of women. It has nothing to do with you personally.” Kyle tried brushing past her body, but she grabbed his arm stopping him from leaving.

“I told you once but you seemed to have forgotten, so I’ll refresh your memory. I’m not romantically involved with Stuart and I have never been nor will I ever be. He’s my friend and nothing else just like I want to be friends with you too, if you let me.”

Kyle gave her a disbelieving look before he shook off her touch. “You aren’t interested at all in being friends with me. You’re only concerned

about how long I'm going to let you hide out here from whatever you're running from. We both know it's the truth so why lie about it?" Going around her, Kyle left the room without even giving her a second look.

Amerie knew that Kyle's cold exterior had to be an act. No one wanted to be that alone and she was going to find out the real reason he was trying his best to get rid of her.

Chapter Five

Standing by the side of the wall, Kyle waited until he was sure that Amerie had walked in the direction of the kitchen before he went out the front door and headed for the stables. Inside, he looked around until he found the person that he wanted. He didn't have time for this nonsense and he was going to put an end to it so it wouldn't grow into a bigger problem later on down the road.

"Walter, can you stop what you're doing? I need to talk to you for a moment," Kyle yelled.

"Yeah, what is it boss?" Walter asked as he came out of the stable and away from the new horse he just purchased last week from a neighbor. "I thought you wanted me to check over this mustang before I tried to ride him."

"You need to leave Ms. Palmer alone. She's a guest here and doesn't need you harassing her while she's in the barn, outside or any other place on the ranch. I don't pay you to try to pick up a new girlfriend. I pay you to take care of the horses and nothing else. Do I make myself clear?"

"Did she run and tell you what happened?" Walter complained. "I thought she would be woman enough to handle a little flirting. I didn't know she would run to you the first time one of us guys looked at her wrong."

"Ms. Palmer didn't run to me about you, Walter." Kyle corrected as he took a step closer to his employee. "I saw what you were doing to her way before she came back into the house. We have been over this topic before. You need to stop harassing women. I have gotten several complaints about you from the bars in town, but I only kept you because you're a damn good worker. However, if you bother Ms. Palmer again, I will have to let you go without pay. I don't have time to be watching over your every move. You're an adult. Why don't you act like it?"

"Are you here telling me this because you're interested in your pretty little houseguest?" Walter snickered. "I didn't think you were the type to want your lazy brother's seconds, but I see that you are. I wonder what he would think about you falling for his woman. I can see why Ms. Palmer

would want Stuart. He's like me, good-looking and funny, but I don't think she would ever take a second glance at a guy like you.

"It's a good thing that you have money, power and influence in this town because if you didn't the women here wouldn't give you a second glance. So, I think you should keep your little crush on Ms. Palmer a secret from everyone else. Unless, you want the rest of the guys here laughing at you behind your back."

Kyle moved closer to Walter until they were face to face. He wanted Walter to hear every single word that was about to come out of his mouth, so there wouldn't be any kind of misunderstanding between the two of them.

"You have exactly two minutes to get off my property or I'll toss your ass off. I don't care how highly recommended you come from the other ranches here in town, I'm not going to deal with your shit or your cocky ass attitude. I fault myself for not getting rid of your ass before now. If you aren't off my ranch in the time I told you, I will have Chuck and two other guys kick you off." Kyle growled before he stormed out of the barn.

Walter's eyes narrowed at his boss's back as he watched him walk away. *Shit! Why in the hell did he open his mouth? Working for Kyle Houston was the best paying job he had in years and that stupid bitch had gotten him fired. How was he going to get another job after getting let go from here? He should have left her alone like Chuck warned him.* Spinning on his heel, he made his way out of the stables and back towards the bunk house so he could pack up his bags.

Amerie started to follow behind Kyle and then stopped in her tracks. No, she wasn't going to bother him again. She would let him cool off and then she would track him down later. It was time that she got better acquainted with the place where she was staying. She still didn't have a clue where Stuart went or when he would even be back, so it might be for the best if she learned her way around this place. Since she knew that Kyle wasn't about to show her a damn thing, it was left up to her to find out about the ins and outs of ranch life.

However, right now the wonderful smell of bread baking was leading her in the direction of the kitchen. She remembered how much her mother loved making homemade bread when she was a little kid. It was one of the

most amazing smells to wake up to on a Saturday morning. She had to find out who had the same amazing talent as her mother.

Walking into a kitchen that should be on the Food Network, Amerie stopped in the doorway as she spied the person cooking the delicious food. The man had to be at least six feet seven inches; tattoos covered both of his large arms. He truly had to be one of the biggest men she had ever laid eyes on and he was inside Kyle's kitchen making fresh bread. There was something really wrong with this picture.

"Are you really the one fixing this mouth-watering food?" she asked, coming further into the room.

Dropping the rolling pin on the counter, the man spun around and glared at her. "Fuck! Why don't you warn someone before you sneak up on them like that?" he snapped. "I could've thrown something at your pretty little head. Everyone here on the ranch knows better than to sneak up on me when I'm cooking."

"I'm sorry," Amerie apologized as she eased away. She didn't want to make this Mr. Clean look-a- like any angrier with her than he already was. God, half the men on this ranch had a stick up their asses. She didn't know what any of their problems were. But they better get over it pretty soon, because she was tired of getting snapped at all the time.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "I didn't tell you to leave. I only got on you for scaring the shit out of me. Most of the people around here don't come back into this kitchen until it's time for lunch. Do you want something to eat? There's some extra food leftover from breakfast in the microwave. Fix yourself a plate and take a seat at the kitchen table."

Amerie debated if she should stay or go. She really wanted to get a good look around the ranch, but she was starving too. So, after thinking about it a few more minutes her hunger won over. Taking a clean plate off the stack on the table, she went over to the microwave and got bacon, sausage, eggs, and a biscuit. "Sir....Do you have any coffee?"

"My name is Tiny," the man told her as he wiped his large hands on the apron tied around his waist. "Take a seat and I'll get it for you. How do you take it?"

"One sugar and some cream," Amerie said as she made her way back over to the kitchen table and took a seat. While she watched the cook fix her coffee she wondered how he got his name, because there sure wasn't anything 'tiny' about him.

"Here you go Amerie," Tiny said, placing the steaming cup of coffee in front of her. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

“How did you know my name?” she questioned. “I didn’t tell you what it was.”

“Miss, I know everything that goes on here at this ranch. I’ve been here long enough to make it my business. Besides when a pretty woman appears out of nowhere around a bunch of lonely men don’t doubt that we aren’t going to notice you,” Tiny joked as he walked away from her and back over to the bread he was making.

Amerie didn’t want to ask, but her curiosity was getting the better of her. “So, how long have you known Kyle and Stuart? They are like night and day. Why are they so different?”

She knew that she was been too nosy with a man she had just met, but she didn’t care. She wanted to find out more about Kyle. Stuart was like an open book; after one look anyone could guess his life story, but Kyle was like a buried chest. A woman would have to dig really deep to find out the treasure on the inside.

“Don’t you dare answer that question Tiny.”

Spinning around in her chair, Amerie spotted Kyle standing in the doorway of the kitchen with his arms folded across his wide chest and the familiar scowl across his face.

Chapter Six

“Kyle, what is wrong with you now?” Tiny complained as he rested his back against the counter by the sink “I swear you always seem to be in a bad mood now.”

“Why wouldn’t I be in a bad mood after firing the best horse trainer I had in four years,” Kyle snapped.

“You finally fired that nut Walter? It’s about *damn* time. I was tired of hearing his cocky ass brag about how good he was at everything. I almost took a swing at him a couple of times myself, but changed my mind at the last minute. I don’t have the time to be dealing with someone like him. However, do you want to tell me the reason you finally let the door hit him where it needed to a long time ago?”

“Why don’t you ask Ms. Palmer?” Kyle asked unfolding his arms. He waved a large hand in her direction. “She was the one who came running to me about how he had mistreated her and I should do something about it.” Kyle gave her another hard look while he waited for her to say something.

Amerie didn’t know if she should be happy or upset that Kyle got rid of Walter. She was thrilled that she would no longer be running into him, but on the other hand she didn’t need another reason for Kyle to dislike her either.

She had never been around a man who seemed to constantly be in a foul mood no matter what was going on around him. She was the type of person who was usually in a pretty good mood most of the time. So Kyle was a project that she wanted to work on because there was no way a man was truly that unhappy all of the time.

“I told you that you should have a talk with him,” she interjected. “I never said the word fire one time. If you fired Walter it was your choice not mine and I don’t think should take the blame for it after hearing the way Tiny was talking about him.

“Your friend Walter should have been out of here a long time ago, but you just didn’t have enough nerve to do it until now. You should be thanking me for helping you out with him instead of trying to place the entire blame with me.”

“Kyle, I have to agree with Amerie. Everyone here on the ranch loathed that guy. We have wanted him gone for years, but you always found a way to keep him because he was so good around the horses. I know no one here will miss him,” Tiny stated.

“Tiny, don’t tell me you’ve fallen under Ms. Palmer’s spell too. I guess I’m the only man here who isn’t turned on by her big brown eyes and cute little smile. Yeah, Walter was an asshole from sunup to sundown, but he knew how to do his job and he did it well.”

“I know why you’re so upset,” Amerie said.

Moving away from the open doorway, Kyle strolled over to where Amerie was sitting at the kitchen table. Placing one hand on the back of her chair, he leaned in close to her face until they were eye to eye.

Amerie hoped that Kyle didn’t notice how her pulse jumped at his closeness. It wasn’t right for one man to have this much raw masculinity and not be aware of it. He’d had her thinking about kissing those hard lips of his since the moment his brother had introduced them.

“Okay, little miss bundle of information,” Kyle whispered softly in her face. “Why don’t you tell me why I’m so angry about firing Walter?”

Licking her lips, Amerie cleared her throat several times so she wouldn’t get choked on her words. With Kyle being this close to her he was making her want to bolt from the room, but she was going to stand her ground and not let him intimidate her. She *knew* that he wanted her to run, but she wasn’t going to do it.

“You’re pissed you weren’t smart enough to let Walter go when your other employees first complained about him. No, you were too prideful to agree with them; however, now you didn’t have a choice in letting him go.”

Kyle’s eyes grew a shade darker right before her eyes and Amerie willed her body not to lean back against the chair. He was just too much man for her. She was used to being around men because of her step-father’s job, but none of his ‘yes men’ compared to the gorgeous man not five feet in front of her face.

“Do you get a rise out of pushing my buttons, Ms. Palmer?” Kyle growled. “Are you trying to get me to toss you out on your firm little ass, so Stuart can complain about how mean I was to you? I have been through a lot with my little brother. Nothing has come between us before you entered into the picture and I can promise you that you won’t be the thing that pushes us apart.”

"I'm not a thing," Amerie snapped poking Kyle in the chest with her finger. "Other women in your past may have allowed you to talk to them any kind of way, but I'm not going to let you do it to me. Besides, I wouldn't let you kick me out of this house. I like it here and I think that I'm going to stay for a while. I want to get to know more people better and I think Tiny might like having me as sous chef."

"You're wrong about that. Tiny is very territorial when it comes to this kitchen. There is no way he would let you cook in here with him," Kyle replied, smugly.

"You're wrong about that boss," Tiny said jumping in. "I would love to have an extra pair of hands in the kitchen especially when they are attached to such a beautiful woman."

Amerie spun around in her chair and smiled at Tiny for helping out with Kyle. She would have to return the favor for him some day, if the angry man next to her hadn't found a way to get rid of her before then. However, she wasn't really scared of Kyle's idle threats. If he had wanted her gone she still wouldn't be here and into another argument with him.

"Are you kidding me? I have tried for the past six months to get you some help and you turned me down flat. Now, you're jumping at the chance to have this girl help you out. How do you even know if she has the ability to boil a pot of water?"

Tiny shrugged one of his massive shoulders. "I don't know, but that is the chance I'm willing to take and if I have to train her so what. Everyone has to learn how to cook sometimes in their life; maybe it's Amerie's time."

"Yeah and something," Amerie said, facing Kyle again. "I'm not a girl. I turned twenty-seven last month. So, keep your *little girl* comment to yourself."

"Sweetheart, I'm thirty--eight years old. I don't have time to play games with a little girl trying to pretend that she's a grown up. You can stay and help Tiny in the kitchen all you want, but don't be a distraction to anymore of my men outside. I'm not going to fire anyone else because of you."

"I haven't met any of your other men but Chuck and I don't have any problems with anyone else who works here."

"Keep it that way and we will get along just fine," Kyle snapped and then he moved away from her and turned on his heel back in the direction of the kitchen door.

Chapter Seven

Amerie watched in disbelief as Kyle stormed out of the room away from her and Tiny. She couldn't figure out what his deal was. He was so different from his brother Stuart and she found that very sexy. He was so raw and untamed. Kyle didn't have a filter for his mouth and something about that was turning her on.

"Don't think about it, sweetheart," Tiny said coming to stand next to her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Amerie said, looking away from the door over at Tiny.

"Amerie, I have seen a lot of women pass through this house with that same look on their faces before."

"What look?"

"The look of a woman who finds that rough and tough side of Kyle very appealing," Tiny retorted. "Let me give you a piece of advice. Kyle's had a lot of women in his life that thought they could change him, but all of them failed miserably. I know that I just met you, but I would hate for you to go down the same road. I see this sweet innocence about you that Kyle could crush without even trying to because he doesn't know how to be a soft man."

Amerie was momentarily taken back by how well Tiny could read her inner thoughts. He was right. She was attracted to Kyle and the way he carried himself. "I was just wondering about him that's all," she lied. "He seems like a very intriguing man. I only want to get to know him a little better. Is there anything wrong with that? We might even end up being friends. I don't see anything wrong with that possibility at all since I'm already friends with Stuart."

"As long as you just wonder you will be doing okay." Tiny patted her on the shoulder before moving away. "Do you want to help me get the stuff together for lunch? The guys here are never late for a meal."

Back home she seldom got to help with anything because her stepfather ruled with an iron fist. She would love to help Tiny anyway she could. Without a doubt, she thought it would be a lot of fun to get her hands dirty in the kitchen.

“Sure, what can I help you with first?” Amerie asked getting up from the kitchen chair.

“Wash your hands and you can help me get the stuff together for the sandwiches. I’m just doing something simple for lunch today since I’m planning on fixing a special dinner tonight,” Tiny replied.

Walking over to the sink, Amerie washed her hands and tried to push thoughts of Kyle from her mind which was a very hard thing to do; however, she had to do it because after the way Kyle tore into her, he probably wouldn’t be around her again until dinner time.

Kyle slammed the door shut to his study the second he made it all the way inside. What in the hell was wrong with him getting so close to Amerie like that? He was trying to deny his own attraction to his new house guest by pushing it off on other people. He was glad that Tiny didn’t call him out on it or he would have to think of a good lie to get out of it. Tiny was very sharp and nothing got past him.

That one trait is why the two of them have been friends for so many years. Tiny never let him run over him with his words or actions. Tiny got in his face and made him realize the truth all the time, but this wasn’t going to be one of those times. Amerie was off limits and she was going to stay that away.

She was affecting him more than any other woman that he had been around in a very long time. He couldn’t let her know how much she bothered him because he probably wasn’t even a first thought let alone a second thought in her mind. This meant he had to stop thinking about her all the time and it had to start today.

Yeah, right like you’re going to be able to do that, his mind taunted. *You’re worried about what she and Tiny are doing right now.*

He had totally been taken by surprise when Tiny had suggested that Amerie become his assistant. He had been thinking about giving her something to do because he wanted her to stay busy and out of trouble while waiting for Stuart to come back from whatever adventure he was doing this time. As long as his baby brother wasn’t planning on not coming back at all and leaving Amerie here with him permanently.

No, he couldn’t let that happen. He would have a talk with Amerie and find out where Stuart might have gone if he wasn’t back in two weeks. He wasn’t going to let his brother get by with any scheme he was up to

this time. He still didn't know the full story about Amerie and where in the hell she had come from. Maybe it was time he found out a little more about her before he got himself any more involved than he already was.

Chapter Eight

“Do you have any good news for me? Have you found that brat yet?” Deacon Singer leaned on his desk and glared at his employee. “I don’t have time to be looking for her. I’m an extremely busy man with things to do that are more important than Amerie, but I can’t have her running around either. I need to have her here, so I can keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn’t open that big mouth of hers.”

“No sir, Mr. Singer. I haven’t found out where she’s hiding,” Blade Bishop replied coming further into the room. “I have my men out looking for her and that dumbass she helped to escape. I swear that once I find out where they are, I’ll bring them both back to you in body bags.”

“I’m not worried about that idiot Stuart she left with. You can make him permanently disappear for all I care. He’s a fool if he doesn’t think I know about his feelings for my wife. He shouldn’t have crossed me. I warned him and he didn’t listen.”

“All I want back is Amerie. She has pushed my buttons one too many times. It’s time that I calmed down that rebellious streak of hers. I tamed her mother’s sorry ass and I can do the same thing with her.”

“Amerie is pretty tough. Didn’t she hit you over the head with something the last time she caught you beating up on her mother? Are you sure that she’ll even let you within touching distance of her after I bring her back? She’s a fighter.”

“That girl is like a wild horse. She has a lot of fight in her that needs to be taken out and I’m just the man to do it,” Deacon snapped his mind already on the different ways he would bend Amerie to his will.

“I mean no disrespect at all sir, but if you aren’t able to get her to obey you, do you think I could have a shot at it? She isn’t one of my favorite people either and I would give a lot to get my hands on her for a couple of hours. I think she needs to understand who’s in charge and it isn’t her.”

Blade tried not to flinch as Deacon’s light brown eyes narrowed in his direction. He wasn’t overly scared of his boss because he had thirty pounds of muscle and at least seven inches that his boss was lacking. However, Deacon Singer wouldn’t think twice about shooting a man in the

head without a second thought and he wasn't ready to die today. He had too many plans and most of them involved Amerie locked away in his room.

"I understand. My stepdaughter can have that effect on a man. I don't blame you at all. After I'm finished with her, I'll be more than happy to pass her on over to you since sex isn't what I want from her."

A frown appeared in Blade's forehead as he watched his boss pick a cigar, light it and then take a long puff. How could any man *not* want Amerie after looking at her? "What do you want from her?"

"I want to see fear in those beautiful eyes of hers. I need to have her so terrified of me that just the mention of my name will send her into a panic," Deacon answered before taking another puff of his cigar.

"Well, let me find her and I'm sure that you can make your fantasy into a reality." Blade knew that Amerie would be no match for whatever evil ideas Deacon had for her. She was strong, but she wasn't tough enough to deal with Deacon and the mean streak that seemed to run through his veins.

"Since you didn't come out of your office for supper Tiny asked me to bring this food in here to you." A tray was placed next to him on the desk as he typed the latest sales figures from his cattle into the computer. Kyle had made sure that he skipped dinner tonight because he wasn't in the mood to sit at the table and watch his men drool all over Amerie. Furthermore, he was pissed that he couldn't stop thinking about her while he stayed inside his den to work.

Kyle saved the last numbers in the accounting program and then shut off his computer. Spinning around in the leather chair, he found Amerie standing behind him wearing a dark blue dress that looked very familiar to him.

"Where did you get that dress?" he asked.

"Your housekeeper found it in the basement. She washed it out and gave it to me to wear along with some other clothing. I wasn't able to grab any of my stuff before I made a run for...I mean left with Stuart."

He heard Amerie's slip of tongue. So, he was right. She was running from something or someone and how much was his brother involved with this mess? Stuart always had a weakness for helping out a woman with a pretty face and no character to her soul. Amerie was *no* different. She had

found a way to use his baby brother. Now Stuart showed up here unannounced just to drop off the woman standing before him before skipping out on the both of them.

“Do you care that I’m wearing it?” Amerie asked running her hands over the blue fabric making him noticed how well it ‘fit’ her body. It used to belong to one of Stuart’s ex-girlfriends that had spent a week with him here. She wasn’t as full in the breasts as Amerie, so it wasn’t as tight.

No, he didn’t mind at all. The color looked stunning on her and she probably knew it too.

“No, I don’t care at all,” Kyle said as turned back around to the food sitting on his desk. He couldn’t recall the last time he had chicken and dumplings. It had been about two months since he had left the ranch to get some at the local diner in town, because Tiny wasn’t too fond of making this dish. He unfolded the napkin and placed it on his lap hoping that Amerie didn’t notice the huge erection that the vision of her in that dress had created.

Picking up the spoon, he took a sip of the broth as Amerie sat down in the chair at the side of his desk. Leaning forward, she watched him while he took another bite of his meal.

“Is it good?”

Against his will, Kyle’s eyes dropped down to Amerie’s cleavage and he thought of something that might taste better than the food he was eating. *Stop thinking about having sex with her*, he scolded himself. He knew nothing about her, but the story Amerie was feeding him and it was filled with more holes than Swiss cheese.

“Yes, it delicious,” he finally replied. “Why?”

“I fixed it.” Amerie grinned. “Tiny asked me if I knew how to fix anything and I told him chicken and dumplings, so he put away the ingredients for his meal and got everything out for mine. I’m glad you liked it. I was worried.”

Kyle was extremely impressed at Amerie’s abilities in the kitchen. He thought this meal was hands down better than the chicken and dumplings than he bought in town at Joe’s when he wasn’t in the mood to eat at home. Maybe Amerie was more than just an attractive face after all, but one meal wouldn’t make her a master cook in his mind.

“Why were you worried?” he asked, watching as Amerie got up from the seat.

“I thought that after you found out I cooked it that you wouldn’t finish eating it. I know the guys told me how much they loved it, but I wanted to

hear your opinion. I knew you would be honest. It didn't matter if you hurt my feelings or not. Well, enjoy your meal. I'll come back later to get the tray. I need to finish up cleaning the kitchen." Amerie moved away from him and headed back for the den door.

"Where's Tiny?" Kyle knew that Tiny never left work until everything item in the kitchen was washed and put away.

"He left early after I told him I could handle cleaning up the kitchen. It didn't need two people and he told me about the long drive he had home, so I thought it would be wrong for him to waste time washing dishes. He showed me where all the plates and stuff went before he left."

Kyle watched as Amerie walked through the door and closed it behind her. The more he learned about her the more of a mystery she became to him. She was like a never ending puzzle that he was trying to solve without all of the pieces.

"Amerie has opened up to me this much, I'll get more out of her. I just have to gain her trust." Kyle resumed eating his food as he thought of ways to get Amerie to let him in a little more. It wouldn't take that much. He could see that now, but he had to pick the right words to say because if he didn't Amerie would move further away from him instead of closer.

"I'll give myself two weeks to find out what she's hiding from me. If I don't have any more information by then I'll have to ask my pretty houseguest to leave and not come back."

Chapter Nine

The sounds of someone moving around inside the kitchen made Kyle ease out of his office and down the long hallway. He wasn't about to let an intruder steal from him and get away with anything that belonged to him. He had worked too hard and too long for a thief to come on his property and take it away without a second thought.

Due to his extensive years in the military, he made no noise as he quickly closed the distance between his office and the kitchen. Kyle paused in the opening of the doorway and pointed the gun at the shadow sneaking around in the dark. He was only going to give the person one warning and then he would shoot.

"Stop, he yelled, "or I'll shoot!"

Female screams filled the room followed by breaking glass as it hit the floor. "Don't shoot, I'm unarmed."

"What in the hell?" Feeling for the lights on the wall by the doorway, Kyle flicked them on and stared at Amerie standing in front of him wearing a pair of tiny white shorts and a hot pink spaghetti strapped shirt with a broken coffee mug around her feet. Her hand was pressed against her chest as she stared at the loaded gun in his hand.

"Why in the hell are you wandering around my kitchen at twelve o'clock at night?" he demanded as he put the safety back on the gun and then laid it on the kitchen counter. "I could have put a bullet in you."

"I couldn't sleep so I came down here to get a warm glass of milk," Amerie answered as she bent down to pick up the large pieces of the mug. "How did I know you would be scared of your own shadow and turn into G.I. Joe on me?"

"I'm not scared of my own shadow. I heard a noise and was protecting my house. Stop picking up the glass. You'll probably end up cutting yourself and I don't feel like cleaning up blood along with glass." Kyle went over to the closet by the kitchen door and grabbed a broom and dustpan from inside.

"Fine, I'll let you clean it up." Amerie glared at him as she dropped the pieces of the mug back down on the floor and took a seat at the island. "I can see you're in a bad mood again. I think you need to get a woman."

Turning around slowly, Kyle glared at the pint sized woman who was beginning to make him want to take her against the wall every time he laid eyes on her. Amerie was on shaky ground with him and didn't even know it. If she did, she wouldn't be pushing at him like she was right now.

"You know nothing about me or my love life. I might have a lot of women in my bed for all you know." Going over to the mess, Kyle cleaned it up and then threw the glass into the trash can underneath the sink.

Leaning back, Amerie rested her elbows on the island. Against his will his eyes noticed how firm and perky her breasts looked in her tight top. His cock jumped to attention when he noticed her hard nipples pressed against the soft cotton.

"I think you're wrong and I'm right," she tossed back with a cute smile "You do need a woman, but you just don't want to admit it to me.

Kyle knew he shouldn't get into this discussion with Amerie but he couldn't help it. She was baiting him and he was dying to know why. All he had to do was move about six steps and he would be able to pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless. He might just do that if he wasn't fond of her answer.

"Okay, Amerie. Enlighten me. Tell me why I'm lying to you?"

"You spend too much time complaining about every little thing that goes on around here. If you were getting enough sex you wouldn't have your mind on anything but finding a way to get more."

Kyle propped the broom against the counter and dropped the dustpan on the floor before he sauntered his way over to Amerie. Blocking her in with his larger body, he placed his hands on either side of her arms preventing her from leaving until he was good and ready.

It was way past time he showed Amerie that she wasn't dealing with his immature brother Stuart, but a full grown man that wouldn't let a challenge like that slip past him.

"What you do know about getting enough sex?" Kyle asked softly as he brushed his lips against the side of her jaw. "Are you saying that you're an expert on the subject?"

"I never said anything of the sort. Anyways, I wasn't talking about me." Amerie tried to turn her head away from him, but he stopped her by wrapping his hand around the back of her neck. His fingers slid up into her hair, loving the silky feel of it as it brushed against the back of his hand.

"Do you know how long it has been since I've kissed a woman? You've been taunting me to do it since the first day I laid eyes on you with

my brother. I'm not a boy like Stuart is. I'm not into playing games or seeing how far I can push someone. When I see something I want I usually take it and be damned with the consequence," Kyle confessed.

"Have you seen something you wanted to take recently?" Amerie whispered, softly.

"How about I show you a better way to use that pretty mouth of yours instead of constantly using it for unwanted advice?"

"I'm not afraid of you." Amerie looked at Kyle with total trust and compassion in her dark eyes.

"Let me see what I can do about that." She didn't have time to react before Kyle covered her soft lips with his hard mouth. He wanted to show her that she needed to stop playing adult games. She was a child compared to him. He had to scare her away from him so she would stop making him feel emotions that he had long buried and never wanted to feel again for anyone.

Amerie wasn't scared of the way Kyle was kissing her at all. His mouth tasted of brandy or some other kind of liquor that she wasn't familiar with, but she didn't care at all. All she cared about was Kyle was this close to her. His body was touching hers and he wasn't holding back because of her inexperience. She had been kissed before by guys her own age back home but none of them made her feel the way Kyle did.

Her hands gripped his forearms and she felt his muscles flex through the sleeves of his shirt. She tried to move closer, but Kyle slightly tightened his grip on her neck, so she couldn't move from the position that he already had her in.

Lifting his head, Kyle's darkened eyes roamed over her face. "Aren't you going to try to fight me?" he teased. "Push me away telling you would rather it be my attractive brother Stuart kissing you instead of me?"

"No," Amerie whispered, softly. She grabbed Kyle's shirt and pulled him closer to her. "I want you to kiss me again....not Stuart. I never have wanted Stuart."

He groaned, lifting her off the stool and switching places with her so he was seated and she was straddling his hard thighs. Amerie felt the hard cock poking at her and tried to move away, but Kyle held her against him and recaptured her mouth again. Unlike the first kiss, this one was softer

more gentle like he was trying to seduce her instead of punishing her for the emotions she caused in him.

“You are so damn beautiful,” Kyle whispered as his fingers moved up her body until he was touching the straps on her t-shirt. “I need to see more.”

She couldn’t look away from the desire-filled need in Kyle’s eyes. “How ... how much more?”

He pulled her straps down her arms until her shirt was around her waist. His gaze was on her and her nipples started growing harder under such close scrutiny. Embarrassed, Amerie raised her hands to cover herself, but Kyle stopped her by shaking his head.

“You are so beautiful...I have never seen a more stunning sight.” Taking his hand, he cupped her breast in his palm playing with the nipple until it was rock hard.

Amerie watched in awe as Kyle lowered his head and his tongue eased out to lick at her before drawing her breast into his warm, wet mouth. As his mouth slid back and forth between her breasts, Amerie ran her fingers through Kyle’s thick hair enjoying all of the wonderful sensations that were wrecking havoc inside her body.

She never thought she would ever let a man this close to her, but Kyle proved her wrong. He was touching her in ways she would never forget as long as she lived.

“So good,” Kyle growled as his hands held her ass grinding her over his massive erection. “Sweetheart, I haven’t felt this good in such a *long* time.”

“Ummm....” Amerie moaned softly as Kyle introduced her body to new sensations it had never felt before...since her first time had lasted all of about ten minutes.

As the sounds of Amerie’s pleasure worked their way into Kyle’s mind, he eased his fingers into the back of her shorts. The feel of her tight ass almost sent him over the end right then, but he wasn’t done. He needed to....

Kyle brought his hands back to her waist holding Amerie in place while he moved her over his throbbing erection in tight humping movements. Dropping his head, he sucked her already swollen nipples back into his mouth biting them as he got lost in the moment.

Amerie started to get a little nervous at how tight Kyle was holding her. Her body was starting to feel all hot and tingled in places that it never had before in her life. She reached out to touch Kyle on his shoulder, but he grabbed her hand sliding it inside the opening of his shirt instead.

“Touch me,” he growled in the back of his throat. “Run your hand across my chest hair. It makes me hard.”

She didn’t think Kyle could get any harder than he already felt between her thighs, but she did as he asked and bit back another moan as Kyle grasped her hips tighter and moved her over the rough denim of his jeans.

“Fuck!” Kyle screamed as his orgasms hit and he tossed his head back getting lost as his release shook his entire body. The second his grip loosened on her waist, Amerie scrambled off his lap and fixed her clothing.

She wasn’t ever going to let Kyle get that close to her again. She almost lost complete control with him and she couldn’t do that. She had to keep her wits about her with her crazy stepfather out there looking for her. She had to be ready to run at a moment’s notice.

Amerie hurried to the kitchen door only to be stopped by Kyle’s passion hoarse voice. “Wait! I can make you feel good. Come back here, Amerie. I swear it will be good for you too.”

“I can’t,” she whispered. “I have to go.” Amerie ran out of the room before Kyle could stop her.

Chapter Ten

Standing out in the hallway Kyle tried to get himself together before he went into the kitchen. He needed to talk to Amerie because he hadn't seen her since last night when he'd embarrassed himself by coming inside his damn jeans. Shit, he hadn't done anything like that since he was a teenager and Bobbi Jane Carison struck her hand down his pants after a football game back in high school.

Amerie was driving him crazy and she didn't even realize it. Now, he had to find a way to get her alone. She would probably run from him the second he laid eyes on her since he couldn't control his sexual need when she was around him.

Well...it was now or never.

Blowing out a deep breath, Kyle ran his fingers through his hair and then walked into the kitchen. He stopped in his tracks at the sight of Tiny standing at the stove cooking with Amerie sitting on the counter top talking to him. Her eyes connected with his the instant he came into the room. The smile slipped off her face and she looked ready to bolt if Tiny hadn't asked her a question preventing her from doing so.

"Do you want to help me bake the cake later? I'm serving it tonight with dinner."

Kyle watched as Amerie looked away from him and back over to Tiny. "I'll only help if it's a yellow cake with chocolate icing and you will let me lick the bowl."

"That is usually my thing, but I guess I can let you do it this time," Tiny teased Amerie as he flipped over pancakes on the grill.

"Good morning, Tiny, Amerie," Kyle said as he went over to a stack of plates. "I'm surprised to see you're still fixing breakfast." He picked up a plate off the counter and started filling it with bacon and eggs all while keeping an eye on Amerie. He noticed how she'd been trying to find a way to leave since his arrival.

"I had some pancake batter left and I was getting rid of the last of it. Would you like these last two?" Tiny placed the fluffy pancake on a plate and sat it next to the rest of the breakfast food that was still out.

“Sure, I’ll take them. I have to work on breaking in a new horse today, so I need all the energy I can get.” Kyle added the pancakes to the rest of his food and took a seat at the table. “Amerie, could you fix me a cup of coffee?”

Amerie looked like she was going to say no, but changed her mind at the last minute. “Sure, I can do that.” Getting up from the counter, she moved over to the coffee pot and got his coffee ready.

“Well...since you seem to have everything you need, Kyle. I’m going outside to get the rest of the eggs out of the chicken coop. I need to fix a cake tonight and I’m out of eggs.” Tiny took off his apron and hung it on the back of the chair. “Amerie, don’t you touch those dishes. I’ll get them when I get back. Why don’t you go outside and look around the ranch. I know you still haven’t seen all of the property.”

“I wanted to help you,” Amerie said as she brought Kyle’s coffee over and placed it in front of him. “I like being around you and hearing your crazy jokes.”

“I’ll tell you more later on. Have fun this morning. Hell, maybe if you’re really nice to Kyle, he might actually take you with him down to the stables,” Tiny said as he went out of the kitchen.

Amerie’s eyes zoomed in on him as soon as Tiny was out of the room. “I better go so you can eat your food. Enjoy your coffee.” She started to move away from him, but he wrapped his hand around her wrist and tugged her down into his lap.

“Stay and talk to me while I eat,” Kyle breathed by her ear enjoying the hint of vanilla he found on her body. “You might find this surprising, but I hate to eat alone.”

She shook her head. “I really should leave.” Amerie tried to get up, but he wrapped his arm around her waist.

“Are you going to rush out of the room every time I enter it? Don’t you think Tiny and everyone else might think that’s strange?” Taking his hand, Kyle massaged Amerie’s stomach through her shirt.

“Let me apologize for what happened last night. I shouldn’t have been so rough with you. I swear if you give me another chance. I can make you scream with pleasure.” Easing his hand under her shirt, Kyle ran his thumb over her nipple.

Amerie grabbed his hand and took it out of her shirt. “No, I think last night showed me everything I needed to know about you.” She got up from his lap and left the room without looking back at him.

Kyle watched the door long after Amerie had disappeared. "I'm going to get you to trust me again," he said to himself inside of the empty room.

Easing behind a tree, Stuart tried to figure out the best way to get back inside the house. He had to find out which room she was in to let her know Amerie was okay. She was the main reason that him and Amerie had been able to escape in the first place. However, it might not be as easy as he thought because Deacon kept a very short leash on his wife half the time. The only time he let her out was when Blade was with her and he honestly didn't feel like he could do battle with that knife expert. Blade never missed when it came to his skills.

"I have to do this for Amerie. She is the only woman who has been my friend without sex being the reason we got together."

Hearing voices, Stuart ducked deeper into the woods until he could see the house and was sure no one could see him. A minute or two later she came out with Blade a few steps behind her. Okay, now all he had to do was get Blade away from her for only a few minutes. He knew Deacon was already gone because he saw him leave about a half an hour ago heading into town.

"I need to find something to distract Blade." Staring down at the ground, he kicked around the leaves and grass until he found a nice sized rock. Picking it up, he tossed it up and down in his hand. "I hope I can still throw like I did when I was in college." Stuart looked in the distance for anything to throw at when he spotted a shed just far enough away to draw Blade's attention.

He raised his arm back far enough and then threw the rock for everything he was worth. The sound of glass breaking echoed across the property. He glanced back at Blade in time to see him say something to the woman before he took off in the direction the noise had come from.

Stuart waited a minute or two to make sure Blade wasn't coming back before he raced across the yard up to the woman sitting by the pool. "Olivia," he whispered as he got closer.

The woman's head swung in his direction and her eyes widened in fear. "What are you doing here? I told you not to come back here, but to protect Amerie," she uttered. "I know you care about me, but you have to leave before Deacon or Blade come back. If they find you here they'll kill you."

“Amerie is safe. I took her to a place where no one will find her. I had to come back to get you. I couldn’t leave you here with him. Come with me. You know how much I love you. Let me help you too.”

Amerie’s mother shook her head. “No, I can’t leave with you. Deacon would have all of his men looking for me if I left him. He’s crazy with power and you know it.” Olivia glanced toward the area where Blade had disappeared before looking back at him. “You have to leave before Blade comes back. He’ll kill you if he finds you here. You know that he’s obsessive with my daughter.”

“No! I can’t leave without you. I know Amerie is worried about you. You’re her mother. She has to see that you’re safe. Come with me.” Stuart reached to grab Olivia’s arm, but groaned and hit the ground instead.

Screaming, Olivia looked behind her and found Deacon standing there. He dropped the stick in his hand on the ground shaking his head sadly. “I thought pretty boy had more sense than to come back here and try to help you. “I knew he had feelings for you because I saw how he would look at you every time you came into the room. Now, I have to get him to tell me where Amerie is. She shouldn’t have run off like she did.”

“NO!” Olivia hollered jumping up from the chair. “You leave my daughter alone. She has nothing that you want. Let her live her life.”

The blow came so fast that Olivia didn’t have time to prepare herself before she hit the ground. Touching the side of her face, she looked up at her husband and the hate she harbored for him grew even stronger. “I don’t care how many times you hit me. I won’t let you harm my daughter. She already has a low opinion of me, but I’m going to prove to her that she can be proud of me.”

Bending down, Deacon grabbed her by the arm and yanked her up from the ground. “I see that you need to be taught all over again. You know better than to deny me!” He screamed as he tossed Olivia over his shoulder. He was headed back in the direction of the house when Blade ran back to the patio from the woods.

“Boss, what happened? I was out at the shed because I heard a noise.”

“Blade, don’t let him take me upstairs,” Olivia begged as she beat at her husband’s back. “Help me! You know what he’s going to do to me when he gets me upstairs.”

“Don’t listen to her. You know better than to interfere when it comes to her punishments. Take care of Stuart. He’s on the other side of the chair. Take him downstairs to the basement. The chair Amerie untied him

from is still down there. I'll be down there to deal with him after I'm finished giving my wife a lesson in respect."

"Yes, sir," Blade said as he took off towards Stuart.

Olivia prayed that she would be able to survive what Deacon was about to do to her because if she did she would make sure that Deacon never laid a hand on her again. She would kill him before she ever let him or Blade laid a finger on Amerie.

"Let's go, bitch!" Deacon growled as he stormed for the patio doors. "I have so many plans for you once I get you back in the house. I will teach you to think you can tell me what to do."

"NO!" Olivia begged as she tried to get off of Deacon's shoulder.

Chapter Eleven

Wandering around the huge property that Kyle owned, Amerie thought back to what happened between her and Kyle last night. She wasn't used to allowing a man to get that close to her because of her step father and his crazy body guard Blade. She knew that Deacon wasn't interested in having sex with her. That wasn't the style of control he used when it came to a woman. No, he would rather beat the living hell out of a female making sure she understood who controlled her every move.

She still didn't know why her mother had thought they needed a man in their lives when she started her freshman year in high school. Her father had died two years before after he was struck by a car while he was out for his nightly run. His death had been so sudden that her mother went into a deep depression for a very long time.

Amerie never thought she would get her mother back, but one day she came home from middle school to find her mother dressed and cooking something on the stove for their supper. Her mother had told her that she was going to become the mother that she loved and remembered. She thought all of the bad stuff was behind them until Deacon met her mother at the grocery store and the two of them had started talking.

Right then and there she felt like the tall man with the perfect tan, the thick wavy black hair, chiseled jaw line and cold dead eyes that felt like they could see right through you was bad news, but her mother was so taken in with the dirt bag she hadn't paid attention to her concerns.

A week before she started her freshman year of high school her mother married Deacon. After the wedding he quickly moved them into his vast estate out in the middle of nowhere. There had been nothing but trees for miles and miles. As much as she hated it way out there away from her friends it wasn't that way for Olivia. It was like her mother was living out her fantasy of having a maid, cook and butler to take care of her every need.

Deacon tried to win Amerie over with gifts and chauffeur driven rides to school for years while she was attending high school, but none of that was making her like him anymore. She knew Deacon wasn't as laid back as he pretended to be around them. He was constantly gone into the early

hours in the morning and when he was home all she heard was him upstairs making love to her mother, but when she saw Olivia afterwards there was some kind of bruise or mark on her body. However; when she asked her mother about the bruises on her face, arms or legs, Olivia would blow it off telling her it was nothing to worry about and not to ever bring it up again. Especially not to Deacon because he was too busy to be dealing with her and her crazy accusations

“Amerie, promise me you won’t confront Deacon. He has been so good to us and I don’t want you to upset him.”

“I know that nothing you did made him put that bruise by your eye? I hear him at night with you and you sound like you are in so much pain. Let me help you. We can escape while he’s gone. You know that he stays away for hours. He won’t be able to find out....please Mama.”

“No, you have only six months of high school left and you’ll graduate. Deacon wants to take us on a trip to celebrate. How can I leave him when he has accepted you as his own child? He isn’t that bad. I swear to you I can take care of myself.”

Amerie had wanted to argue, but she let it go. She knew that her mother’s mind was made up, but she wasn’t done. Deacon would be home in a couple of hours and she would give him a piece of her mind.

“I wished I had listened to my mama, but I had to do what I thought was in the best interest for both of us.” She slid her hands into the front pockets of her jeans as she got lost back in her memory and the first time Blade entered her life.

“I want you to stop beating on my mother. I swear if you put another finger on her I’ll call the police and have you arrested.” Amerie threatened as she confronted Deacon outside by his black Lexus. “You have no right to hit her!”

“Well...aren’t you all up in a fiery mood. What’s wrong with you Ms. Amerie?” Deacon asked as he pushed the car alarm on his key chain.

“How can you stand there and act like you aren’t abusing my mama! You know that you abuse her every single night. I hear you.”

“Sweetheart, when you find a man you’ll see that is how two people show their love for each other. You’re still too young to know anything. Once you graduate high school and then take your ass off to college, your opinion will change.”

“I’ll never let a man have control over me like my mama has with you. You’re an evil bastard and I hope that you get what’s coming to you,” Amerie screamed.

Laughing, Deacon brushed past her, but she grabbed his arm. “I’m not done with you. Don’t you dare walk away from me.”

Deacon jerked his arm away from her and latched on to her wrist. He applied enough pressure so she could feel his strength. “Little girl, I have about had my full of your attitude. I’ll do anything I want to your mother. She’s my wife. However, you are just my step-daughter. I can have you sent off to college out of state and you won’t ever get to see her again.”

“I’m not scared of you,” Amerie snapped tugging at her wrist. “Let go of me.”

“You may not be scared of Deacon, but you sure in the hell better be scared of me,” a voice warned behind her.

Looking over her shoulder, Amerie spotted a man well over six feet walking around Deacon’s Lexus. Just the aura that poured from him made her nervous and his clear blue eyes and long thick black ponytail added to his menacing aura.

“Who are you?” she whispered as Deacon finally let go of her wrist. She rubbed the sore spot trying to get the circulation back into her fingers.

“His name is Blade. You don’t ever want to find out why he has that nickname, I promise you. I hired him to watch your mother and you while I’m out of town on business,” Deacon replied, placing his hand on her shoulder. “This is Amerie. Remember I told you about her during our phone call. She’s very opinionated and loves to confront me every time she gets a chance. I’m hoping to get a chance to break her of that bad habit soon. I already have her mother where I want her.”

“I see,” Blade commented. “I’ll make sure to keep an extra eye on her. I think I should be able to make Amerie understand who the boss is while you’re gone.”

“NO! You will leave that up to me,” Deacon shouted. “I have it all planned out, but I’m not ready to get into it yet. You won’t touch her. Do you understand me?”

Amerie tried not to show any fear as Deacon and Blade talked about her like she wasn’t there, but she knew now with the addition of Blade that her and her mother’s lives had gotten twenty times worst.

“Amerie....Amerie...”

The sound of someone screaming her name shook Amerie from her shaky memories of her past. She hated to leave her mother back there, but she had to save Stuart and the only way to do that was leave out in the middle of the night while everyone was asleep.

Turning around, Amerie saw Chuck running towards her and she couldn't help but smile at him. Chuck reminded her a lot of Stuart: full of energy with a ready smile on his handsome face. He wasn't anything like the distant man she was unfortunately attracted to and wondered how she could stop it before it went any further.

“Hey Chuck, what are you doing out here?” she asked walking up to him.

“I was at the stables checking on the new stallion when I saw you way out here. I decided to come and speak to you. We haven't talked in a while. How are things going with you? Has Kyle been nice to you? Everyone here knows what a pain in the ass he can seem at first, but he isn't as bad as most people think.”

“Everything is going good. I wish that Stuart was still here. I was always able to talk to him about anything. We became very close while we were coming here.”

“Do you mind if I step into his shoes?” Chuck asked as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “I could always use another friend. How about you walk back to the ranch with me? I think Tiny should have lunch ready by now.”

“Sure, let's head back. I think I'm getting a little hungry myself since I didn't eat any breakfast.”

“You missed out on Tiny's famous buttermilk pancakes? What in the world is wrong with you?” Chuck kept his arm around her as they both walked back to the front of the ranch.

Neither one of them noticed the man watching how comfortably the two of them were interacting from his office window.

Chapter Twelve

“You seemed to have wrapped Chuck around your little finger the same way you did Tiny and my brother,” Kyle accused as he walked inside of the barn. “Don’t you have anything better to do with your time then flirt with all the men around you?”

He had sat through lunch watching Chuck and the other ranch hands flirt with and tease Amerie like she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Hell, he was jealous and he hated it. But after the moment they had shared in the kitchen how could he not be? Amerie wasn’t supposed to run from him, but find more ways to be around him and she wasn’t doing it.

Spinning around, Amerie glared at him like she didn’t want to be around him, but she was going to deal with his presence anyway. He knew that he pushed her a lot, but he couldn’t help it. She made him feel things he had never felt before and it scared the hell out of him.

He tried to stay away from her; however, he always found different ways to be around her. He was supposed to be in his office going over sales figures for the last horse he sold last month, yet here he was out here talking to Amerie. This needed to stop because his attraction for her was getting hotter with each passing day.

“Why are you always so negative?” Amerie questioned. “I wasn’t flirting with any of your employees during lunch. We were only talking to each other but you were too busy shooting daggers at the other men at the table to see it.”

Kyle frowned. “You’re wrong. I didn’t care about your conversation. I just think my workers should have better control of themselves around you.”

“I don’t think I have ever seen you smile since I came here.” Amerie exclaimed hitting a sore spot with him.

She wasn’t the first woman to criticize his brooding behavior and he wasn’t pleased by it at all. She knew *nothing* about him. Which meant it wasn’t any of her damn business how much he smiled or didn’t smile. She was only a guest in his house and it was past time for her to get out in his opinion.

“Do you want to see a smile on my face?” Kyle tossed back. “Go inside and pack your stuff. You will see a grin on my face that will run from ear to ear. The sooner you’re out of my hair the better off I’ll be. I’m a busy man and don’t have time to watch over you for my brother. ”

“You want me gone? Fine, I can leave,” Amerie exclaimed. “I’ll find somewhere else to stay besides here with your cranky ass. I won’t take this abuse from you. I left my own home because of it. I’m not about to allow you to do the same thing to me. Stuart told me that I could trust you and I would be safe here but he was so wrong. I would do better on the streets than worrying everyday about when you’re going to toss my clothes out in the front yard.”

Amerie moved away from the stall containing his prize winning white Andalusia horse. “Give me thirty minutes and I’m out of here. I can do better on my own anyway. God, it isn’t like I haven’t been taking care of myself since high school. I’m older now so it shouldn’t be harder, but a lot easier.”

Kyle’s blood started to boil at the thought of some bastard abusing Amerie. This was the first time she had brought this up to him. Was that why she got so scared of him in the kitchen? Had he brought back bad memories of her past without even knowing it?

Shit, he was going to get to the bottom of this. She couldn’t toss this kind of information out to him and then tell him in the next breath she was planning on leaving. Hell, he had threatened to kick her out several times before, but he didn’t and he wasn’t about to do it now.

Moving over, he blocked Amerie’s path as she tried to storm past him. He couldn’t let her leave and walk into some kind of danger she wouldn’t be able to handle. Just the thought of some bastard touching her made him want to rip the guy’s throat out with his bare hands.

“You aren’t going anywhere.”

“Watch me,” Amerie snapped as she brushed past him. She only made it a couple of steps before he hauled her back to him

“No, you aren’t. Don’t test me, Amerie.”

“Let go of me.” Her small hands shoved at his chest, but he barely felt a thing. If she didn’t have enough strength to get out of his light grip, how was she going to be able to protect herself against whoever was after her.

“Stop fighting me and let me help you,” Kyle whispered as he massaged her back through the thin t-shirt she was wearing. “You trusted my brother and you can trust me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You hate me.” Amerie stopped her struggles and glanced up at him. He saw the uncertainty in her dark brown eyes and it put a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“No, sweetheart,” Kyle corrected. “What I feel for you is so far from hate it isn’t funny.” He ran his fingers through her hair. He loved how well their bodies melted together. He had been trying to fight it since he first laid eyes on Amerie, but he knew she was the woman for him. Now, all he had to do was get her to trust him enough so she would tell him about her past.

Whatever it was he would make it go away along with any other demons that might be chasing her in reality or make believe. Stuart was right for bringing Amerie here to him. She couldn’t be in a safer pair of hands. He didn’t spend fifteen years in the military for nothing. He knew how to defend what was his and even if she didn’t know it yet, Amerie was his.

“You sure could have fooled me,” she said. “You act like I’m the most horrible person that has ever crossed your path. I find it hard to believe your reaction to me is just an act.”

“Let me show you how much your opinion about me is wrong.”

The need to kiss Amerie had been eating at him all morning and the desire had only grown worse as he sat across the dining room table with her earlier. He was usually in such good control of his emotions, but Amerie just made him crazy with longing.

When he lowered his head to kiss her, Amerie didn’t move but raised her head willingly. He wanted the kiss to be soft and tender, but the second his mouth touched hers it was hot and passionate. Grabbing her chin, he lowered it a little so he could slip in tongue inside.

Kyle heard the soft mewling sounds coming from the back of Amerie’s throat as he sucked her tongue back into his mouth. As much as he tried he knew he would never be able to get enough of her.

Amerie had found a way to work herself into his system and there wasn’t a shot in the world that was going to be able to get her out. She was there for a lifetime and he didn’t hate the possibility of it at all.

He tugged her closer to his body with one hand at the back of her neck to hold her in place while the other one drifted down to palm her luscious ass. His cock jumped to attention when Amerie rubbed her lower body against his.

He only wanted to kiss her to get a sample of what he had been missing, but the kiss was starting to get way out of hand. He had to put an

end to it now or he would end up carrying her into one of the stalls and making love to her for the rest of the day.

“Amerie, we need to stop,” Kyle whispered against her swollen lips as he moved slowly away.

“What? Why?” Amerie asked staring at him with desire glazed eyes.

“I need to calm down or this is going to go further a lot faster than I want it to. In addition, I want you to tell me about whom or what you are running from. I can help you, but you need to come clean with me and let me give you the protection you need.”

Stark terror passed across Amerie’s beautiful face as she stumbled back from him. “No, you can’t ever find out about them. They’ll kill you and I can’t have your blood on my hands. It’s my problem and I will take care of it,” Amerie said before she turned and ran from the stable leaving him standing there perplexed and troubled at the same time.

Chapter Thirteen

“Are you ready to tell me where my stepdaughter is? I know you’ve taken her somewhere, just point me in the right direction and I’ll make sure that Blade doesn’t come back in here,” Deacon said as he walked around the man tied up to the chair. “You know how much he loves using his knives on people. Do you truly think you’re strong enough to handle another visit from him?”

“Go to hell,” Stuart yelled as he struggled with the ropes that fastened his arms to the metal chair he was sitting on. He wasn’t about to tell either of these two bastards anything about Amerie. She was safe with his brother and that was where she was going to stay.

“I have to give you credit for staying so strong for that little pain in the ass,” Deacon complained as he paused in front of him. “I thought once I had her mother under control that Amerie would bend to my will too, but I was wrong. I guess when I get her back I’ll have to work on that tough spirit of hers more.”

“You aren’t ever going to get Amerie back to this prison you live in. She’s safe from you and it will stay that way if I have anything to do with it. I’ll get her mother away from you too. Just give me another opening and I’ll make sure you don’t see your wife again either.”

Deacon shook his head as he went over to the table with all of Blade’s knives spread out across it. “No, I don’t think so. See, my wife knows better than to cross me. She knows what she’ll get if she ever tries to leave me. I *own* her. She wanted a nice life, fine clothes and to be able to dine out at the best restaurants in town. I give her all of that, but it comes with a price.”

Stuart watched as Deacon picked up a menacing looking butcher knife and ran his finger along the edge. “I wish I had the stomach to cut up people the way Blade does. He seems to get so much joy out of seeing people bleed, but I really do hate the sight of blood. Every time Olivia has one of her accidents, I’ll always make sure that she gets cleaned up.”

“You bastard,” Stuart hollered. “The only accident Olivia has is when she’s getting beaten by you. I swear to God I’m going to kill you when I get the chance and no one is going to put me into jail for saving her.”

Slowly, Deacon placed the knife back down on the counter and then made his way back over to Stuart. His hand shot out so fast and grabbed Stuart by the hair that he didn't have time to flinch.

"Don't you dare ever think about threatening me again," Deacon warned in a low voice. "I may not be a knife expert like my friend Blade, but I do know how to get rid of a body. Olivia is nothing to me and I'm sure she won't be missed by anyone but you because you're dumb enough to be in love with her."

Stuart tried not to show any fear as the words started to sink inside of his head. "Olivia is loved by a lot of people. Amerie will hunt you down too if you harm her mother in anyway. She's a lot smarter than you're giving her credit for."

"I'll give you that one. Amerie does have brains to go with that pretty face of hers, but once Blade gets hold of her she may not be picture perfect anymore. Didn't you know that my bodyguard loves to destroy beautiful things? It's for the best that you remember that." Deacon let go of his hair and patted him on the shoulder.

Stuart glanced around the room looking for a way to get out, but bars had been added to the windows he escaped through with Amerie before. The basement seemed like it was Fort Knox now which meant there probably wasn't a way out. What in the hell was he going to do? He couldn't let Deacon or Blade find out where Amerie was hiding, but it would only be a matter of time before they found out about his brother's ranch.

"I hope you aren't planning another escape because it isn't going to work this time. The only way out of this room is that door," Deacon said, pointing to a door in the far corner of the room, "and the only two people who have keys to the door are Blade and of course myself. Sorry, Stuart you are here until you tell me what I want to know."

"I'll never tell you. You'll have to kill me." He wasn't about to give up Amerie to this demented asshole. Stuart knew he hadn't done a lot of selfless things in his past, but if this was the first and last thing then he would be proud to do it.

"With the way Blade loves to play with his knives that just might happen to you," Deacon snickered as he moved past him and headed for the door at the back of the room.

The sound of the door slamming shut made Stuart start to work on the ropes around his wrists, because it was only a matter of time before Blade made an appearance down here with him. So far he had gotten lucky and

the sharp objects had stayed on the table. Blade was having too much fun playing with him.

Stuart knew he had to get out of this cold ass basement and back to the ranch. Amerie needed to know that Deacon hadn't stopped his search for her. Damn it! Stuart hoped that Kyle wouldn't get back into his old ways and toss Amerie out on the street.

"Shit! Why can't I get these knots loose?" he complained. It seemed like the more he pulled at them the tighter they got. How in the hell had Blade tied them?

Hearing the key turning in the lock made Stuart stop working on the ropes, he couldn't let Blade know what he was up to or it would be the death of him. No, he had to stay alive for Amerie and Olivia. They both deserved to be out of this living hell Deacon and Blade had placed them in.

"How's my favorite person in the world doing?" Blade snickered as he slammed the door closed. "I've been upstairs having a nice little talk with Olivia. Did you know that she's tough as nails when it comes to her daughter? I tried several different things to make her tell me where my sweet little Amerie was and she wouldn't give up her location. So now I believe Deacon is having a talk with her. I know that he'll get something out of her."

Moving around him, Blade stood in front of him and rolled up his sleeves. Stuart noticed several blood stains across the front of his otherwise white shirt and instantly anger raked his body.

"What in the hell did you do to Olivia? I swear if you've hurt her I will make you regret it for the rest of your worthless life." Stuart wasn't about to let Blade anywhere near Olivia again.

"I like you, Stuart. I really do," Blade said as he strolled over to the knives spread out across the counter. "However, I can't leave this room until I get the location of Amerie out of you. Deacon is tired of waiting for her to come back, so he's going to speed up things a little."

A thin line of sweat started to pour down the side of Stuart's face as he watched in terror as Blade picked up a medium sized knife that resembled a sword. "This has to be my favorite toy. It can barely cut through the skin before an intense pain rakes throughout your body. I have made men bigger than you tell me everything with one single cut. I know you won't last longer than five minutes."

That is what you think.

He was going to prove Blade wrong. Stuart knew in the past he had only focused on partying and having fun, but it was way past time for him to grow up and it would happen today. It didn't matter how many times Blade cut him open or beat him up, Blade would never find out where Amerie was hiding. Her secret would be safe with him until the day he died.

“Let's get this started. I'm sick of hearing you talk.” Stuart closed his eyes and sent up a silent prayer praying that his life would end quickly instead of slowly.

Chapter Fourteen

Walking around his office, Kyle thought about everything that had happened between him and Amerie in such a short period of time. Amerie's presence had brought so much life to his usual lackluster and tedious ranch existence. He hated how the other men here seemed to be drawn to her, but he noticed that Amerie didn't do anything to make his employees flirt with her.

It was just something about her personality that drew them to her. Even Tiny had been singing her praises the other day and his cook was a tough former military man and very hard to please. However, what worried him the most was that Amerie seemed nervous of him. Sure, she would have a short quick conversation with him, but as soon as possible she would find a way to get away from him.

Didn't she know that he wanted to help her out with whatever problems were haunting her? Yesterday, she had given him a hint into her past, but nothing that he could work with. Damn it! This was the first time in years that he was attracted to a woman and she was fighting him at every turn.

Most of the women here tried to look past his okay looks to get to his wealth, but Amerie had to stop herself from running the other way every time he came within touching distance of her. Did she really forget about the moments they'd shared in the kitchen? God, he had spent so many restless nights thinking about a way to get her back into his arms and more importantly his bed.

For years, he had kept this distance between himself and a lot of women because he didn't look like Stuart. With his younger brother's blond angelic good looks women fell over themselves to get closer to him, but he knew the reason women asked him out and it wasn't because they thought he was good-looking. No, they knew about how much he was worth and found ways to deal with his lackluster looks.

However, Amerie was different from them because she didn't have a clue how much this ranch was worth or the money he made off breeding his prize winning horses. She was attracted to him for him and nothing

else. He wasn't so inexperienced with women that he didn't see how she would look at him when she thought he wasn't paying attention to her.

Stopping in front of the huge window, Kyle ran his hand across the back of his neck as he watched his ranch hands working on getting a new foal he'd bought inside the barn. The owner was about to lose his ranch and sold him the pure bred at an extremely low price. He would have been a fool not to have taken the deal. Once she was old enough, he would be able to breed her with another one of his horses and make a nice sum of money off the colt that came from the mating.

Shaking his head, Kyle moved away from the window. Why was he trying to even think about work when his mind was on Amerie? She had become so important to him and he doubted she even knew how much she stayed on his mind most of the day and throughout his lonely nights.

"I'm done waiting for Amerie to make the first move," he mumbled to himself. He was going to find her and make her admit that she was attracted to him as much as he was to her. If he had any say about it, Amerie was going to be in his bed before the week was over. He was tired of giving her time to get used to him. He wasn't a patient man and he'd already used up what little bit he'd given to her.

Kyle headed for his office door and went out in search of Amerie. He checked the living room first but she wasn't there so he made his way toward the kitchen and found Tiny but not her.

"Tiny, have you seen my pretty houseguest?" he asked coming further into the room. "I need to talk to her about something." Kyle stopped by the sink and watched as Tiny rolled dough to make fresh bread for the weekend. In his opinion, there was nothing better than Tiny's fresh sourdough bread. He could eat the whole loaf in one day and not think twice about it.

"Amerie went out for a walk. She's been gone about ten minutes. I think she wanted to get a better look at the south end of the property," Tiny said as he placed the bread in the bread pan and then stuck it in the oven.

"Thanks. I'll go and find her." Kyle turned to leave but was stopped by Tiny touching his arm.

"Can you stick around for a few minutes? I think we need to talk about Amerie before you try to move things ahead between the two of you." Tiny removed his hand and took a seat at the kitchen table.

Frowning, Kyle joined Tiny at the table trying to stay calm until he heard what his friend wanted to get out in the open. What in the world was

going on? He didn't need to get a lecture like he was a little kid or something. He was thirty-eight years old and could do any damn thing that he pleased with his life.

"Okay, what do you need to tell me?" Kyle asked leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Don't go after Amerie because she's a challenge for you. She's a very sweet girl and she doesn't need to have her heart broken by you. I know it's been a while since you've dated a woman, but Amerie isn't the one to get your feet wet with."

"How dare you try to tell me how to live my life!" Kyle shouted. He wasn't sure what Tiny was trying to do but he didn't appreciate it at all. He was too old to be getting dating advice from his best friend.

"Kyle, the last woman you showed this much interest in was Kim and I know you remember how badly that turned out. You went after her with the intentions of making her your wife and she was using you to further her career.

"Kim was never in love with you. When you found out the truth I've never seen you so heartbroken and down on yourself. You haven't thought about another woman in over four and a half years. Until Stuart made a sudden appearance with Amerie and I saw how you looked at her."

Kyle was insulted that Tiny thought he was trying to replace Kim in his heart with Amerie. They were two totally different women and he understood that. He wasn't dumb. Amerie wasn't trying to use him in any way, shape or form. From the moment Amerie appeared, it was like a whole new world had been opened up to him and he loved it. He wasn't about to let his past keep him from going after her. He knew she was in trouble and he would get her to open up to him.

How could he not want to help her? She was the most open and understanding woman that he'd ever met in his entire life. Yes, she might be several years younger than him, but it didn't matter to him at all. All he wanted to do was to get Amerie to tell him what had her in such fear. Whatever it was, he would make it go away. Stuart wanted him to keep her safe and at first he hated the idea, but now it was all he could think about.

"I won't lie to you. Yes, I'm attracted to Amerie, but it's more than that. She needs my help. Something or someone is after her and I need to find out what it is. She's running scared and it's left up to me to find out how to help her. If you care about her as much as I think you do then you'll help me."

Tiny's face clouded with sudden anger. "Who's after Amerie? I'll be more than happy to teach them a lesson. No one is going to hurt her. Why hasn't she told me this? We've talked about so much while she has become my sous chef, but not once has she mentioned about anyone trying to hurt her."

Kyle felt better learning that Amerie hadn't opened up to Tiny either. He knew how close the two of them had become since she'd arrived here. It would have hurt a lot if Tiny had an insight into her past that he didn't.

"I don't know who is after her. Every time I try to bring it up she blows me off and walks away. I do remember Stuart telling me that the reason he brought Amerie here was so she would be safe, but he never told me who was after her before he took off. In addition, when I mentioned to Amerie that Stuart had taken off she wasn't happy about it at all."

"Do you think that she knows where Stuart went to?" Tiny asked. "Maybe he went to talk to whoever is after her?"

Kyle shrugged his shoulders. "I can't answer any of your questions. Amerie is very good at keeping things to herself and it has to stop. She needs me. I know that she does and I won't be able to help her until she stops trying to hold everything inside."

Tiny got up from the table and went over to check on the bread in the oven. "I have to agree with you. Amerie doesn't seem like she's carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. She reminds me so much of you trying not to ask for help when in fact she needs it desperately."

Facing Kyle again, Tiny crossed his arms over his wide chest. "What are you going to do to help her?"

"I'm going to keep working at it until Amerie finally believes she can trust me with her secret. I won't let her leave here because I have no fucking clue who Amerie is so scared of, but if he lays on hand on her, I will kill him and not think twice about it."

"Don't push her too soon," Tiny asked.

Kyle was listening to Tiny's advice and as good as it sounded he wasn't quite sure if he was going to take it. Something needed to be done about Amerie and he thought now was the time not later. He had to be prepared if someone showed up here looking for her. He hated surprises and he didn't want one when it came to her.

"I hear you, but I can't promise you anything." Getting up from the table, Kyle went out the door hoping he would be able to find Amerie before she got back to the ranch house. He wanted a different place to talk to her hoping it would get her to let him in more. How could he help the

woman he was falling in love with if she wouldn't let him past all the barriers she had put up around her?

Chapter Fifteen

Amerie didn't know how long she'd been wandering away from Kyle's ranch across the field because her mind wasn't on that. She was thinking about someone she hadn't let enter her mind until now—her mother. She shouldn't have let Stuart take her away like that without trying to help her mother escape too.

There was no telling what was going on back at that house. She had gotten lucky enough to finally sneak out during the middle of the night. It was only by sheer luck that Deacon had a mistress on the side and was at her place with Blade or she wouldn't have been able to untie Kyle's brother in the basement and leave without them finding out until it was too late.

She wasn't even sure if her mother was still alive. Her stepfather was a mean SOB and wouldn't think twice about killing Olivia during one of his weekly beatings. She truly didn't know how he hadn't done it already.

Why did she and her mother get put into this situation?

Yes, they had been struggling for a while before Deacon slithered his way into their lives, but everything had gotten a hundred times worse with him. God, if only her mother hadn't been so taken with all of the stuff he had tossed at them in the beginning. There was no way Deacon wasn't working a scam on them and her mother had been too blinded by dollar signs to see it.

The sudden crack of thunder in the sky shook Amerie from her bad memories. Glancing up, she noticed the dark rain clouds rolling in above her. Hell! Why hadn't she spotted them earlier before she decided to take this walk way out here away from the ranch? Sure, it was still on Kyle's property, but the ranch buildings were nowhere in sight.

Why was she being so stupid all of a sudden? Amerie didn't have to wait for an answer. She knew why...Kyle. He was getting under her skin more and more each day. He was the kind of man that didn't even know how sexy he was. He had a way of walking into a room that made a woman take notice of him. She was positive that she wasn't the first woman to notice it.

Kyle kept getting on her for trying to attract other men to her, when in reality he was the only man she wanted. However, she would never be able to act on it. There was too much baggage in her past. She knew that Deacon and Blade were looking for her. Guys like that didn't give up their search until they got what they wanted.

No, she wasn't about to put Kyle, Tiny or anyone at the ranch in any kind of danger. She had to find a way to get out of here without Kyle finding out. Her mother needed her help and she was going back to that house to get her away from her crazy stepfather.

Amerie was still wandering around the property looking for somewhere to take shelter from the storm when she noticed a house about twenty yards off in the distance. She hurried off in that direction as the first rain drop hit her on the arm.

Please let someone be at home.

By the time Amerie made it halfway to the house she was caught in a complete downpour. The rain was hitting so hard against her skin that it felt like she was getting a beating.

Stumbling up on the porch, Amerie sent up a silent prayer of thanks and then ran up to the door. "Is anyone home? Please let me in." She banged on the door a couple of times before she realized the house was empty. Running over to the window, she peeked through a small opening in the curtains and noticed the place had furniture along with a fireplace.

Just the thought of stripping out of these wet clothes and sitting in front of a warm fire shot her into action. Amerie hurried back to the front door and hoped that maybe someone hid a spare key somewhere. She knew that she was about to break into a stranger's home, but she didn't care at the moment. She was tired, wet and starving. She would just deal with whoever showed up.

Brushing the wet hair away from the side of her face, Amerie searched under the potted plants on the porch and finding nothing she raced back down the steps and looked under a couple of big rocks on the ground but no luck. Honestly, she was about to give up until she remembered where her grandmother always hid her spare house key at her house when she was a little girl.

Amerie darted back up the steps and pulled back the thick rug in front of the door. She could barely keep the tears out of her eyes as she spotted a silver key underneath. She didn't waste any time picking it up and tossing the rug back down.

Please...Lord in heaven let this work and I promise never to wander off by myself again.

Placing the key in the lock, Amerie felt the lock click open and she didn't waste a second hurrying into the house and slamming the door shut behind her. She felt around on the wall for a few minutes for a light switch and seconds later the room was filled with light.

"Thank you...God!" Amerie whispered as she made her way over to the fireplace. She only hoped starting a fire in the fireplace would be as easy as turning on a light because she didn't go through all of that not to be able to sit in front of a warm fire and get her cold, wet body comfortable.

Thirty minutes later, stripped out of her wet clothing, she was sitting in front of a roaring fire wrapped inside of a thick wool blanket that had been tossed on the back of the couch. She only prayed whoever owned this house was out of town or long gone because she wasn't ready to battle for her life tonight. Once she was warm enough she was going in search for some food in this place.

The next time she wanted to go sightseeing she would make damn sure that she stayed closer to the ranch. No one knew she was way out here. Sure, she told Tiny that she was going for a walk, but he wouldn't think she would be crazy enough to come way out here. God, Kyle was going to be pissed as hell with her. There was no telling what he was thinking right at this moment.

The sound of the front door being thrown open ripped a terrified scream from Amerie's throat as she jumped up with the blanket wrapped around her body and grabbed an iron poker from the stand by the fireplace. Her heart pounded inside of her chest as a tall, wet figure stepped through the door. Raising the weapon, Amerie was ready for a battle of her life until she heard:

"Amerie, what in the hell do you think you're doing?" Kyle yelled coming inside the house slamming the door closed behind him.

"God...Kyle, you scared the hell out of me," Amerie snapped as she placed the poker back into the stand. "How in the world did you find me?"

"I went out looking for you after Tiny told me you went wandering around on the ranch. I didn't have a clue you would make it out this far.," Kyle ran his fingers through his wet hair. "How in the hell did you even get in here?"

"Why don't you finish answering my questions first and then I'll answer yours," Amerie tossed back pulling the blanket tighter around her

body. She was practically naked with a man who she was dying to know more on an intimate level.

“It was sheer luck. I was out by the bull pen on way back to the ranch when I noticed the smoke from the chimney in the distance. If you hadn’t lit that fire, I would’ve never found you. Now, care to tell me how you got into my old house?”

“Your house,” Amerie asked stunned. “You live on the ranch.”

“Shit. I have to get out of these wet clothes before I catch a cold,” Kyle complained as he walked away from her and through a door at the far side of the room.

Amerie wanted to follow him and demand answers, but decided it would be best if she stayed by the fire until Kyle came back. Sitting back down, she tugged the blanket closer to her and waited for him. She had a lot of questions and he was going to answer them.

Ten minutes later, Kyle came back wearing a towel around his waist and drying his thick dark hair with another one. Amerie’s mouth went dry at the sight of his muscular washboard stomach.

This was the first time she’d seen Kyle without a shirt. Hell, it was the first time she’d seen him in nothing but a towel and she couldn’t tear her eyes away. His body was perfect with his wide chest dusted with dark hair, washboard stomach, lean waist and thick thighs. He had to truly be the sexiest man she had ever laid eyes on. It was such a shame that she wasn’t going to be here much longer.

Kyle could have turned into ‘the one’ for her, but now all he was going to be was a good friend who helped her out in her time of need. She was dying to tell him all about her past, but she couldn’t. It was just too risky. Kyle would be the type of man who would be dying to save her; however, she didn’t need or want a savior right now.

“Do you care to tell me now how you got in here?” Kyle asked as he tossed the wet towel he used to dry his hair on the couch and then joined her on the floor.

Amerie tried not to notice how the towel wasn’t providing much barrier between Kyle and what she was dying to see. However, she had to get her focus back on the question he asked her.

“Hmm...I found a key under the rug on the porch,” she answered taking a peek at Kyle’s chest before glancing back at the fire. She was getting very hot all of the sudden and it wasn’t from the fire.

“Damn Stuart!” Kyle exclaimed. “Wait until I see him. I told him about placing that key under there, but I guess it was a good thing he did or you wouldn’t have had a way to get inside of here.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Now, are you going to tell me why you are way out here away from the ranch? I was going crazy looking for you,” Kyle said watching her closely. “Were you trying to run away? I thought I told you that you could tell me anything and I would help you.”

Amerie darted a glance at Kyle and tried to look away but he grabbed her chin forcing her to keep eye contact. “Sweetheart, you can tell me anything. What are you hiding from? I swear I’ll help you if you just tell me what it is.”

Kyle didn’t know how badly she wanted to confide in him, but she couldn’t do it. Deacon and Blade were vicious men and they wouldn’t think twice about killing Kyle just for the fun of it.

“Don’t you trust me?” Kyle asked as he leaned closer to her until his mouth was mere inches away from hers.

“Yes... I trust you,” Amerie answered staring into the eyes of the man she was falling in love with.

“Oh, baby, I’m so glad you do.” Kyle’s warm firm lips captured her mouth the second after the words left his mouth.

Chapter Sixteen

Amerie thought about pushing Kyle away from her, but her arms had a mind of their own as they wrapped around his wide shoulders pulling him closer to her. She moaned deep in her throat as his warm, solid chest brushed against the top of her breasts.

Slowly, his lips moved from her mouth and inched their way over to her ear. "Amerie, I want you so badly. Do you want me as much as I want you?"

Hell, she was tired of denying her emotions when it came to Kyle. She'd wanted him from the very first moment her eyes connected with his. She was going to sleep with him. Damn the consequences. Tonight was the night she would do something for her and no one else. It was about time that she did something totally out of her character.

"Yes, I want you too," she admitted, running her nails down Kyle's back. "I've wanted you for such a long time now." She loved how warm his skin was beneath her fingertips.

"Sweetheart, you're going to get me for the rest of the night," Kyle promised making her think about all kinds of sexy thoughts. His mouth continued to nibble at her skin until his lips stopped at the front of the blanket tucked between her breasts.

Moving back a little, Kyle's long thick fingers pulled at the fabric until it came open. She watched from underneath her lashes as Kyle separated the material and stared at her breasts. Seconds turned into minutes as he continued to stare at her without saying a word.

She finally got tired of waiting and asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kyle whispered as he cupped her left breast in his hand and ran his thumb across her swollen nipple. "You're the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. I could stare at you for the rest of the night." Lowering his head, Kyle drew her nipple into his mouth and suckled gently.

The sensation of his mouth making love to her breasts shot a pool of moisture between Amerie's thighs. Amerie didn't want to think about her past, her mother or anything else going on in her life. All she wanted to do

was *feel* and get lost in Kyle. She wasn't sure when this would happen again, so she was going to enjoy every single moment.

"Oh God...Kyle," she moaned running her hands down his sweaty back. She was burning up and it wasn't from the fire. It was from needing Kyle deep inside of her body. He was the only man that would be able to fix the need scratching at her skin.

"Come on...Tell me how much you want me," Kyle whispered as he ran the tip of his tongue across her skin. "Damn you taste *so* good."

"I want you. You know that I want you," Amerie confessed.

Leaning away from her body, Kyle's gaze raked over her exposed flesh like he was trying to imprint it into his memory. She saw lust in his eyes and another emotion that she couldn't pinpoint and wasn't too interested in doing at the moment.

His hands moved up her bare thighs pushing the rest of the blanket off her body. Her passion spiraled out of control when Kyle spread her legs wider and settled between her thighs.

Before she could say anything Kyle kissed her, slipping his tongue inside of her mouth. The kiss only lasted minutes before Kyle was nibbling at the side of her neck and then drawing the tender flesh between his two front teeth.

"Kyle...what are you doing to me?" Amerie moaned as her body rose up to meet his more. She was still dying to have him inside of her and he wanted to play around like this. What in the world was going on with him?

She had never felt this way before. It was like something was on the brink of happening, but it wasn't quite there yet. God...why wouldn't Kyle give her what she wanted and so desperately needed from him.

"Amerie, do you trust me?"

The question came out of the blue so fast that Amerie was seriously taken back. She had depended on herself for so long that she didn't know how to answer Kyle at first...but she did have an answer for him.

"Yes, I do trust you." She knew deep down that Kyle would never hurt her. He may be a little rough around the edges most of the time, but he was a good man and without a doubt would stand beside her if she needed his help.

"Thank you," Kyle whispered as he moved back so he could look into her eyes. Taking the tip of his finger, he trailed it down her face and then slipped it into her mouth

Sucking it further in, Amerie nibbled at the tip loving how Kyle was making her feel so sexy and free. She wouldn't trust another man enough

to be with him like this. Kyle was bringing a side of her out that she thought she had buried a long time ago.

"I don't trust people," Amerie confessed as Kyle removed his finger from her lips and his cock eased inside of her body. She didn't have a clue when he'd removed the towel and right at this moment she didn't care as long as Kyle kept making her feel this *good*.

Kyle growled and buried his face against the side of her neck. Amerie tried to wrap her mind around what was about to happen, but she couldn't think about anything else but how excellent Kyle felt above her and in her.

"Well, I'm about to change all of that right now," Kyle promised before he thrust in completely until he was balls deep.

"Oh my God...you're so big."

Kyle laughed roughly before he planted a soft kiss at the side of her mouth. "You're so tight and wet, so I guess that makes us an excellent match...doesn't it, sweetheart." He started to move and she tried to close her legs, but Kyle spread them wider and pushed them down to the floor.

He was so warm, thick and hard. She felt like she was filled so *deliciously* with every inch of Kyle. She had wanted this for so long and she wasn't unhappy about it at all. Slowly, he began moving in and out of her driving her insane little by little until all she cared about was him. He was giving it to her...

Shit, she couldn't even come up with a word to describe it. Closing her eyes, Amerie mewled in the back of her throat while the hot fire flickered next to her body, but that wasn't what was making her hotter than a summer's day...it was *Kyle*.

Grabbing her by the hips, he pulled her to his hard body and sped up his movements until she had to lean back on her elbows to keep her head from moving against the floor in time with his rapid thrusts.

"I can't take it," Amerie panted as she felt her orgasms coming. She was almost there when Kyle eased out of her until only the head was left touching her entrance. Her eyes snapped open and she glared at Kyle with everything she had in her.

"What!"

"It isn't going to be over that fast, Amerie," Kyle said. "Do you know how long it's taken me to get here with you? I want it to last forever and ever. I'm not going to let it end this fast. No, I want you out of your mind and crazy with the need to have me before you get what you need from me."

“Sweetheart, it’s okay...just let me love you. I need to make up for that incident in the kitchen. I have to show you that I can make you scream my name until your voice is hoarse.”

Lowering his head, Kyle licked at her nipple before drawing the already overly sensitive bud into his mouth. His teeth nibbled at it for a minute or two before his tongue joined in licking away the pain.

With sure strokes, Kyle worked his cock in and out of her like he was the owner of her body and she was so lost in the moment, she wasn’t about to stop him. She needed her mind off anything and everything, but what was going on in this room.

Kyle slowly released her breasts and stared into her eyes. “Do you feel me?” he demanded as his thrusts got harder and amazingly deeper. “Can you feel how extraordinary we are together?”

“Yes,” Amerie moaned as she raised her hips in tempo to his movements. “I...” The rest of her comment was cut short as her orgasm raced through her body almost making her black out from the sheer explosive pleasure of it.

“Kyle...” she screamed.

Holding her hips even tighter, Kyle rode her until the sweat from his body started to drop down onto hers. Minutes later, he tossed his head back and shouted out his release as the muscles strained in his neck.

“Amerie....Fuck...Amerie!” he hollered as his seed erupted inside of her. His arms gave away and his body came down on hers as the last of his release ripped through his hard, muscular body.

Amerie knew at that moment that Kyle owned her heart and soul and she would do everything in her power to protect him from the dangerous things in her past. She wasn’t about to let him get hurt or even worse, killed because of the men looking for her.

Kyle slowly pushed his weight off her and lay down next to her. Within minutes, they were both covered up by the blanket that had been covering her body an hour before. His muscular arm rested loosely around her waist then he planted a kiss at the back of her neck.

“Are you ready now to tell me why you’re here hiding out at my home?” His question slammed into her like a ton of bricks.

Damn!

Chapter Seventeen

“Amerie, you have to tell me why Stuart brought you here,” Kyle said as he pulled her closer to his bare chest. He was going to get to the bottom of the reason Amerie was so secretive when she first arrived at his ranch. Whatever it was he would help her through it. She was his now and he wasn’t about to let anyone, including his brother, take Amerie away from him.

“I can’t let you get involved. It’s my problem not yours.” Amerie tried to move out of his arms, but he pulled her back to him. He wasn’t going to allow her to keep hiding her past from him. He could tell she was still scared to let him in, but he was going to break down the last of that wall keeping her from trusting him completely.

“Please tell me,” he whispered, trying a different tactic with her this time.

“No... Deacon would...” Amerie instantly shut up when the name accidentally slipped out of her mouth. Kyle knew that this Deacon person had to be the reason Amerie was scared to tell him the truth.

Who in the hell was he?

“Sweetheart... Who’s Deacon?” Kyle asked as calmly as he could without losing his temper. If this man had done something to hurt this woman in his arms, he would kill him. “You have to tell me what is going on or I can’t help you or my brother. Is Stuart in trouble too? Is that why he left the same night he gave you to me?”

When Amerie tried to move out of his arms this time, Kyle didn’t stop her. Amerie sat up and pulled the blanket against her breasts while she stared into the roaring fire. Getting behind her, Kyle tugged her to him and placed the blanket around both of their bodies. He knew Amerie was about to tell him something important about her past and he didn’t want to rush her.

“My parents had a wonderful marriage. I have never seen two people in love with each other more than they were, so when my father died without warning my mother took it very hard. She stayed in bed almost six months after his death. She truly had a hard time keeping it together.

“After a while, his insurance money started going down so she finally got herself out of bed. She got two jobs to support us while I went to high school. Even with the two jobs, she still had a lot of bills because of the unpaid hospital bills, mortgage and our other living expenses.”

“I told her that I could get a part time job and still go to school, but she wouldn’t hear of it. She told me to focus all of my attention on graduating and then going to college. She could handle any financial problems that came our way. I didn’t believe her, but I didn’t argue with her either.”

“Well...one day my mother was at the mall shopping for a birthday and graduation present for me with the money she had been saving up when she ran into the guy...Deacon. When she came home he was all she could talk about and I was happy that she’d found a new friend. I didn’t think anything was wrong with him at first until I met him.”

Amerie didn’t realize she had shivered at the memory until Kyle’s hand rubbed her arms and he told her it would be okay. She nodded her head and continued with her story. She hoped she could get through it without breaking down again.

“Deacon came to our house a couple of nights later to pick up my mother for their first official date. When I opened the door and laid eyes on him my heart dropped to the pit of my stomach. He was picture perfect gorgeous with his black hair, killer white smile and model good looks, but his eyes were empty like he didn’t have a soul. I was almost too scared to even let him inside of the house, but I did it for my mother.”

“I knew he was no good, but my mother’s face lit up the second she came into the living room and saw him sitting on the couch. Anytime Deacon was around, my mother acted like a high school girl with her first adult crush. He loved taking us places to show off how wealthy he was. I hated it, but my mother loved it. “

Amerie got silent for a while as her fingers played with a piece of string hanging off the blanket. Kyle kissed the back of her neck and whispered against her skin that everything would be okay. She silently counted the seconds until Kyle would ask her what happened next.

“Baby, what happened to Deacon?” Kyle asked, softly like he wasn’t trying to bring back bad memories.

“My mom married him in a small private service that only a few people were invited to. I was so upset that I had refused to attend until Deacon pulled me aside and had a talk with me. He has a mean streak that you don’t want to mess with,” she whispered in a low voice.

Anger raked through Kyle's body at the hint of fear in Amerie's soft voice. "What did he do to you?" he demanded.

"Nothing really...he just grabbed me by my arm and told me I would regret it if I didn't attend my own mother's wedding. I took one look in his eyes and knew he meant every word, so I went and two weeks later I graduated from high school."

"By the time my mother was beginning to see her mistake marrying a man she didn't really know, she didn't want to go back to struggling the way we had been doing so she put up with Deacon and his abuse."

Kyle spun Amerie around so he could look into her eyes. His hate for Deacon was growing deeper and deeper the more he heard about this bastard. "Are you saying he hit your mother?"

"No, he hits her," Amerie corrected. "It's been going on for so many years now that I can't remember how it all started. I think he started abusing her on their wedding night, but I couldn't be for sure."

"All I remember is that once we were having dinner and Deacon had asked my mother a question and she didn't answer him fast enough. He hit her so fast that she completely fell out of the dining room chair and hit the floor hard."

Using his thumbs, Kyle brushed away the sudden tears that were pouring down Amerie's face. "I tried to jump in and stop him but he shoved me out of the way and continued to hit her. Then he picked her up, threw her over his shoulder and carried her upstairs to their bedroom. I could hear my mother screams, but I couldn't do anything because of Blade."

Who in the fuck was Blade? Kyle thought.

"Blade...?"

"Blade is my stepfather's body guard and he's a dangerous man and doesn't like to take no for an answer," Amerie confessed. "From the first time he laid eyes on me he has tried to find different ways to get me alone with him. Once I came out of the shower in my bedroom and he was standing in the middle of the room waiting for me."

"My God...did he try anything with you?" Kyle knew the second he saw Blade...this guy was going to die.

Amerie shook her head. "He didn't get a chance because Deacon came into my room and ordered him out. Deacon warned him that he wasn't to come near me again unless he told him that he could."

"I'll kill him," Kyle growled underneath his breath. "Tell me where to find him and I'll make sure he never bothers you again."

Amerie grabbed him by the arm. "You can't," she screamed, fear in her voice. "I couldn't take if something happened to you. I already have to deal with that with my mother and Stuart might already be dead my now. Blade is a master when it comes to cutting people up. He lives up to his name."

Kyle's heart almost stopped beating in his chest. Stuart was dead? No...Amerie had to be wrong about that. His brother got on his nerves with his problems, but he didn't want him to be dead. Stuart was the only family that he had left in this world.

"Tell me how you and Stuart got together and why you think he might be dead?" He could barely get the words of his mouth.

"My stepfather doesn't like it when people don't keep their promises." Amerie spun around and faced Kyle. She couldn't get over how much she cared about the man in front of her. He had shown her that there were still some good men in the world.

"Stuart borrowed some money from some people to pay off some debts that he owned and when he wasn't able to pay it back, they sent Deacon and Blade after your brother."

Kyle never knew that his brother had gambling debts. Why hadn't Stuart come to him for the money? Shit, they were family. He would do anything for his baby brother as long as it didn't involve giving up Amerie, because that wasn't ever going to happen. She was his and he wasn't ever going to allow anything or anyone to come between them.

"I never knew that Stuart had a gambling problem," Kyle said as he ran his hand down Amerie's arm. "God, have I been so lost in my own loneliness that I wasn't aware of what was going on around me?"

"I'm not sure if Stuart had a gambling debt or not. All I know is that when people don't pay the money they owe Deacon is the person who gets called and he always takes Blade with him. I guess that Stuart wasn't doing what they wanted, so they bought him back to the home and tied him up downstairs in the basement."

"Deacon never knew that I was hiding on the stairs watching him. I was waiting there to confront him because I had just left my mother's room and she was covered in bruises. I was pleading with her to leave Deacon, but she said that she couldn't because he was her husband."

"I just don't understand what's wrong with her. If you could have seen my mother when my father was alive," Amerie said with a small smile on her face. "She was strong, independent and carefree. I don't think she ever had a bad day in her life until she married Deacon and both of our

lives were shot to hell in a matter of three short days. I can't stand that bastard. I should go back home and make him pay for what he's done to my family."

Amerie flinched when Kyle wrapped his hands around her arms and jerked her to his body. "You aren't going anywhere near Deacon. Do you understand me?" he growled. "I'm not going to allow you to go back there and deal with him. You don't know what he's capable of. If my brother and your mother are already dead then he won't think twice about killing you. I didn't get you just to lose you."

Amerie's love for Kyle grew at his concern, but she couldn't stay here forever. She had to go back home and find out if her mother was okay. Deacon was a heartless bastard, but was he really sick enough to kill her mother and Kyle's brother?

"Amerie, promise me that you aren't going to try to leave," Kyle demanded staring into her eyes.

Amerie paused while she stared at Kyle. She knew that if she told him the truth that he wouldn't let her out of his sight, so as much as she hated to do it, she lied.

"I promise that I won't try to go back home and confront Deacon or Blade."

Chapter Eighteen

“I don’t know what part of your pretty face that I want to cut up first,” Blade threatened as he held the knife against Stuart’s face. “I should have cut you the other day, but Deacon wanted to take care of Olivia. So now I get to have my fun with you. Do you want to tell me if you want to get sliced on the left or right?” Blade chuckled when Stuart flinched and tried to turn his head away from the sharp tip of the knife.

“You know that you can save yourself a lot of pain if you just tell me where Amerie is hiding. I swear I’m not going to hurt her. All I want to do is spend a little alone time with her and that hot ass body.” Blade’s eyes glazed over like he was thinking about everything he was going to do to Amerie.

Stuart struggled against the ropes that held his hands tied behind his back. He wasn’t going to let Blade or Deacon anywhere near Amerie. He promised her that he’d keep her safe and he was going to keep his word.

Kyle wouldn’t let Amerie leave his sight. He hoped by now that his brother had fallen for Amerie. He saw the interest in Kyle’s eyes when he first introduced them. Amerie was the perfect woman for his aloof brother. She was sweet, loving and very caring, just the perfect combination to break down the steel wall Kyle had built around his heart over the years.

“I don’t have a clue where Amerie is and if I did I sure in the hell wouldn’t tell you. You sick bastard!” He shouted.

Stuart flinched as a burning sensation shot down the side of his face. He felt wetness as his blood slid down his cheek. He refused to cry out in pain. He wouldn’t give Blade the satisfaction. He would take whatever Blade wanted to do to him as long as it kept Amerie safe and hidden at his brother’s house.

“Come on...I know that had to hurt like a bitch.” Blade laughed as he wiped the bloody knife on his already stained spattered shirt. “Tell me how much it hurt and I might take pity on you.”

“Fuck you,” Stuart spat.

Blade's eyes narrowed into slits before he moved the knife from Stuart's cheek down to his throat." Are you ready to die? I never let anyone talk to me like that and live."

"Do what you have to do. If me dying will keep Amerie safe from the likes of you and Deacon then that is what I will have to do."

Blade pressed the knife closer to the throbbing vein in his neck and leaned in closer. "I'm impressed with you Stuart. I thought you might be too much of a coward to stand up for anyone, let alone Amerie. When I do find her and don't ever think I won't because I will," he promised, "I'll make sure to tell her how you stood by her side up to the very end."

Stuart sent up a silent prayer and got ready to spend his last few minutes on earth. He had been a screw up most of his life, but he was finally looking out for someone else and it felt amazing.

"Get ready," Blade whispered in his face.

"STOP...Blade...don't kill our little guest yet," Deacon said, coming into the room pulling a struggling and beaten Olivia behind him.

Stuart's anger grew as Deacon flung Olivia down at his feet. He noticed the bruises that covered her arms and face. If he wasn't tied up like this he would kill Deacon for treating Olivia so badly. A woman as gorgeous as her needed a man like him who would love her and not live to put his hands on her each and every day.

Fuck! He had to get them out of here. Olivia wouldn't be able to handle another one of Deacon's beatings. She was already fragile enough as it was. He just had to pick his moment and then he would do what he had to do.

"Why can't I kill him?" Blade asked as he glanced at Stuart and back at Deacon. "You told me I could have some fun with him."

"I know that I did and you will get your chance to have fun with Stuart," Deacon promised as he looked at him with a huge smile on his face.

Stuart was worried about what was going on. Why had Deacon brought Olivia down here with them? What kind of torture did he have in mind for her now?

"Olivia, are you okay?" Stuart asked trying to block out the other two men in the room. He had to find out how she was doing. She was more important to him than they were.

"I'm okay," she answered softly taking a peek up at him from underneath her lashes, but he saw the tears in her eyes. "I was worried about you so Deacon dragged me down here to see you."

“Why shouldn’t I bring my wife down to the man that’s in love with her,” Deacon snapped, hotly. “What I don’t understand is...Stuart, why would you want my wife. She’s such a waste of breath. I swear I think that’s the main reason I have to keep her under control. She needs to learn not to question me or anything that I do. God, all she does is bitch and cry all the time about her daughter. If she’s so unhappy, I think it’s about time that I put her out of her misery, don’t you?”

No! Deacon couldn’t kill Olivia. It would destroy him. He had to save her. He knew that Blade wouldn’t have a problem killing him and Olivia. He lived for that kind of sick pleasure, but he wouldn’t show these two bastards any fear.

“You aren’t going to hurt Olivia. You’re only threatening her so I’ll tell you where Amerie is and I’m not about to do that.”

“Is that what you really believe?” Deacon laughed as he yanked Olivia up from the floor by her arm. “Blade, hand me your knife. I think Stuart needs to see that I mean business.”

“Boss, I like the way you think.” Blade placed the bloody knife in Deacon’s hand. “Are you sure that you don’t want me to do it? I can make sure that she’ll be unrecognizable.”

Damn it! He had to stop this. Stuart continued to work with his wrists hoping to get the ropes loose. If he didn’t get out of this chair, Olivia was dead and he wouldn’t be able to get over it. Deacon might as well put the knife right through his heart.

“You need to stop moving or I’ll end it right now,” Deacon warned in a low voice.

Stuart stopped moving when Deacon placed the knife against Olivia’s slender throat. He hated how dangerous the metal looked against her beautiful brown skin. Her hazel eyes widened in fear as she stared at him.

“Stuart, this is your last chance to tell us where you took that bitch Amerie. Don’t you understand that she needs to be here with her family?” Deacon said. “I love my stepdaughter. It’s a horrible world out there. I want her home with us where she belongs safe and sound with family.”

“Amerie *is* with family,” Stuart shouted and then instantly realized his mistake. He only prayed that Deacon or Blade didn’t catch his slip of tongue. “Let Olivia go and take it out on me. She has *nothing* to do with what is going on between us.”

Slowly, Deacon shook his head and pressed the knife harder to Olivia’s neck. Stuart heard a soft whimper coming from Olivia’s mouth.

“Sorry, your luck just ran out. You should have told me where Amerie was and since you didn’t, you have cost her mother her life.”

Deacon moved his hand to cut Olivia’s throat until Blade hollered. “STOP! I know where Stuart took Amerie.”

Chapter Nineteen

“I could stay like this all day long,” Kyle whispered by Amerie’s ear as he pulled her closer to his body. “I don’t know the last time I stayed in the bed this late. I’m usually up before my ranch hands. My days involved work, work and more work.”

“Does that mean I’m turning you into an old man?” Amerie asked as she relaxed next to Kyle. “Maybe I should leave and find a guy closer to my own age...”

Amerie didn’t have time to finish her sentence before Kyle had flipped her over on the bed and was looming above her with a scowl on his handsome face. It was really hard for her not to smile. He was actually jealous of something that would *never* happen.

“Don’t ever think about leaving me. I will follow you to wherever you go and bring you back. Furthermore, if I ever catch another man with you I’ll make his life a nightmare. I’ve waited a long time for a woman like you and I’m not about to lose you...ever!”

“Are you the same man who wanted to kick me out of your house days after meeting me?” Amerie asked running her index finger over a bump in Kyle’s nose. He’d told her last night after they had made love that he had gotten it when he was sixteen years old.

“I wasn’t thinking straight back then; I was upset that Stuart dropped off this hot looking woman at my house. I was insanely jealous that once again he got a beautiful woman who would never look twice in my direction.”

Amerie secretly wondered how any woman in her right mind could want Stuart over Kyle. Stuart would make a kick ass best friend, but she would never want him as a lover. No, he wasn’t her type at all.

“Well, I hope that you know now I want you and not Stuart. I was never interested in your brother.”

“I think I do now since you’re naked in bed with me and not him.” Bending his head, Kyle placed a soft kiss by the corner of her mouth. “Do you know how much I like you?” he asked, lifting his head.

“You only like me?” Amerie pushed Kyle away from her, so she could sit up on the bed. “Here I thought we were working toward something deeper and now I know that we aren’t.”

Getting off the bed, she stormed toward the living room to find her clothing. She wasn’t about to stay here a moment longer after finding out the truth. Shit, she would be crazy to spend another second in bed with Kyle.

“Amerie, wait,” Kyle hollered after her as he followed her into the living room. “I didn’t mean it the way it came out.”

Grabbing her dry clothes off the floor, Amerie quickly got dressed as she tried to keep from telling Kyle to go to hell. She finally decided to give into Kyle because she thought that he loved her. However, now she just found out that he only ‘liked’ her.

They weren’t in middle school. She wanted a man who actually loved her and sadly, Kyle wasn’t going to be that man. So, she had to leave before things got any deeper. She wouldn’t allow herself to be in the same kind of twisted relationship as her mother.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I see what last night meant to you compared to me and it’s okay. Thanks for letting me know now instead of later,” Amerie said as she finished getting dressed.

Amerie spun toward the door and was about to open it when Kyle’s hand shot out and slammed it shut with the palm of his hand. “You can’t leave,” he said above her head. “Didn’t you hear me earlier when I told you that you couldn’t leave me? I wasn’t kidding.”

How dare Kyle expect her to want to stay after he just told her that he wasn’t in love with her? He was out of his mind.

“I’m sorry to inform you that I’m my own woman and I can do anything I want,” Amerie tossed back. “Why do you care about what I do anyway? It’s not like you love me or anything.”

“Baby, look at me,” Kyle whispered against the back of her neck sending the familiar tingling awareness all over her body. He pressed his chest into her back. “Let me finish what I was going to tell you in the bedroom before you ran away from me. I swear to you that it’s very important.”

Minutes ticked by as Amerie wondered if she should do as Kyle asked or knock his hand off the door and walk out of his life.

“Please, sweetheart,” Kyle whispered, softly.

Slowly, Amerie faced Kyle and noticed that he had only wrapped the sheet around his waist to come after her. Shit! She couldn't get over how well-sculptured his body was from the hard work he did around the ranch.

Stop drooling and focus, her mind scolded.

"I'm listening."

Kyle tried to pull her into his arms and she pushed against him. "You don't need to touch me to talk."

He looked like he wanted to argue with her, but he let it go. "Baby, I wasn't trying to hurt you by saying I like you. I do like you; however, I love you with everything inside of me. You brought love and passion back into my dull and lifeless world. I don't think I'll ever be able to repay you. Do you know how unique you are?"

Some of the hurt started to leave Amerie's body as she listened to Kyle's words. He was the man she had been waiting for all of her life, so to hear that he only *liked* her had hurt...*a lot*.

"Okay... fine. Can I leave now? I need to get back to the ranch. We've been gone for a while. I know that everyone is wondering what happened to us."

"No." Moving closer, Kyle pressed his hot body against her clothed one. The feel of his thick erection against her stomach was making her body turn into an inferno. It wasn't right that he was doing this to her.

"We're going to stay here so I can prove how much you mean to me." Kyle grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head tossing it behind him somewhere on the floor.

"Won't someone at the ranch be worried that the boss isn't back today? I mean don't you think some of the workers will come looking for us?"

Picking her up in his arms, Kyle carried her back toward the rumpled bed in the other room. He gently placed her in the middle of it. He yanked the sheet from around his waist and then covered her body with his naked one.

"Tiny knows that I was out searching for you. So if I don't come back he'll know that I'm with you and everything is okay. Besides, I know my workers can handle whatever comes up. That's why I hire capable men to look after my property."

"So, you think I want to spend the day in bed making love to a man who only confessed his love for me after I threatened to leave him," Amerie questioned, running her hands down Kyle's muscular back.

Slowly and seductively, his gaze slid downward and over her exposed breasts. Something intense flared through his look causing a tingling in the pit of her stomach. She tried to fight the dizzying current racing through her.

How was it possible that this man was unable to unlock her heart and soul so fast without her even seeing it coming?

“I think you would do it for a man who will protect and love you for the rest of his life, because sweetheart that is what I’ll do for you.”

“You have a way with words,” Amerie whispered, wrapping her arms around Kyle’s neck.

“How can I not when I have the most beautiful woman in the world in my arms? I never knew how empty my life was until I met you.”

“You’re making it really hard for me to turn your offer down.”

“I think I can show you even more how true my words are,” Kyle promised and then captured her lips with his.

Stuart struggled against the ropes as Blade grinned at him. There was no way in hell that sick fuck knew where Amerie was hiding. Blade was bluffing. He had to be or he wouldn’t be able to handle if his slip of tongue had given Amerie away. She wouldn’t know that Deacon and Blade were coming and he wouldn’t have a way of warning her either.

“You don’t know a damn thing,” Stuart shouted.

“Oh, I think I do,” Blade smirked. “How about I prove it to you?”

“You can’t prove anything because you’re clueless.” Stuart wasn’t about to give anything away to these two creeps.

“Don’t you recall telling us that your brother could repay that fifty thousand dollar debt you owed, but you got lucky at poker and didn’t need to call him? I’ll bet Amerie is with your brother. What was his name again?”

Stuart closed his eyes as a sick feeling settled in the middle of his chest. No! Deacon and Blade couldn’t find Amerie. Deacon wouldn’t think twice about killing her, but seeing Amerie would only fire up Blade’s twisted mind and the things he had planned for her. He had to protect her.

“You’re wrong,” he lied. “I didn’t take Amerie to my brother’s house. I haven’t talk to Kyle in years. He got tired of my nonsense and banned

me from ever coming back to his house. So, you have to think of something else.”

“Is Blade really wrong?” Deacon asked as he grabbed Olivia and jerked her to him. “I think he’s right. You did confess that Amerie was with family. I know all about Olivia and her bitch daughter. They don’t have anybody else but each other. So, Amerie’s hiding place only leaves your family. Tell me Kyle’s address or I swear that you’ll regret if you don’t.”

“Go to hell!” Stuart shouted.

Deacon gave him a sickening grin displaying perfectly white teeth against his tanned face. It amazed Stuart that someone like Deacon who could have anything in the world was such an abusive son of a bitch. What happened to Deacon as a child that turned him into such a dangerous man?

“Stuart, I really don’t think you want to insult me with Olivia in my arms. I might just get upset and do something that you would hate and make our precious Amerie an orphan. Can you handle being the man responsible for her heartbreak?”

Deacon closed his hand around Olivia’s throat until she started to claw at his fingers and struggled against him. “Are you going to watch the woman you love die right in front of you?” he taunted. “I don’t have a problem ending her life right here and now because she means nothing to me.”

“Let go of her you bastard. I swear if I wasn’t tied up I would kill you,” Stuart threatened.

“You have nothing to intimidate us with,” Blade snapped jumping back into the conversation.

Walking back over to Stuart, he held a knife to his throat and bent down until they were eye level. “I know you care about Amerie, but do you love her more than you love Olivia? Deacon isn’t playing about choking her to death or he might even snap her pretty neck. You never do know with him.”

Stuart’s eyes darted past Blade and found Deacon’s grip growing tighter by the second. Olivia was going to die right in front of him. Deacon wasn’t kidding with him. Could he give up Amerie to save her mother...the woman he was in love with?

“I guess your silence is my answer,” Deacon said wrapping both of his large hands around Olivia’s slim throat. “It’s time to tell my wife goodbye because this will be the last time you see her alive.”

The fear in Olivia's eyes made Stuart jump into action because he had no other choice.

“Wait!” Stuart hollered.

Chapter Twenty

“Do you want to tell me why Kyle was so happy this morning at breakfast?” Tiny asked. “I was expecting the two of you to show up yesterday, but you didn’t. However, the two of you walked in holding hands an hour before breakfast.”

Amerie stopped washing the breakfast dishes. Wiping her hands on the dishtowel next to her, she turned around and looked at Tiny who was smiling from ear to ear.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, coyly. “I didn’t walk into the house holding Kyle’s hand.” Amerie made sure that she didn’t stare at Kyle so no one would catch on to what they had been doing. Despite the fact Kyle had stared at her more than eating the plate of food Tiny had placed in front of him.

“Is that how you want to play it?” Tiny crossed his arms over his massive chest displaying all of tattoos. “Are you really trying to tell me that you and my best friend didn’t spend the better part of yesterday and this morning getting better acquainted with each other? I do mean by being wrapped up in the sheets out at his cabin.”

Amerie’s mouth dropped open at Tiny’s bluntness and then quickly shut. “Yes...Kyle and I stayed in the cabin together until the storm blew over. That’s it.” Amerie folded up the towel hoping that Tiny would stop teasing her.

“Amerie, a man doesn’t look at a woman the way Kyle was staring at you unless he’s madly in love with her.” Tiny moved away from the kitchen table. Walking across the room, he paused in front of her and looked down at her. “I’ve known Kyle for a while and I never seen him watch any woman the way he does you. He’s in love with you. I hope you know how special that makes you.”

“Kyle has dated women in the past that weren’t in the relationship for love. Shit! Some of those bitches only got involved with him to get closer to Stuart. Kyle was even about to give a woman named Tori an engagement ring until he overheard her talking on the phone about getting his brother into bed.”

“How could someone be so cruel?” Amerie questioned, pissed. She better not run into this woman because she might slap her into next week. Kyle was an amazing man and she had fallen hard for him right after their first fight.

Kyle was the type of man that demanded attention the moment he walked into the room and everyone gave it to him because they were interested in seeing what he was about to do. How could any woman want to let that kind of raw appeal go for carefree Stuart?

“Gold diggers don’t have any morals, sweetheart,” Tiny said, patting her on the shoulder. “But from the second I saw you I knew you were different. You had this innocent quality about you. I knew it would draw at Kyle’s protective side and I was right.”

Amerie thought back to when Kyle fired one of his ranch hands for disrespecting her right after she had arrived at his home. She thought for sure that he would take the guy’s side but he hadn’t.

Kyle would protect her from Deacon, Blade or any other threat that came her way and she loved him so much for it. Kyle was the most perfect man. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

Just as long as it didn’t involve getting married, she thought to herself. After being around her mother’s marriage for so many years to Deacon, the idea of getting married had left a bad taste in her mouth and a slight fear in her heart.

“I love Kyle too,” Amerie confessed. “I want to spend the rest of my life with him and have a house full of kids running around.”

“That’s wonderful.” Tiny picked her up and spun her around. “You need to tell Kyle about this as soon as possible because you don’t want him to hear it from me. Kyle has a right to know from you.”

“Kyle has a right to know about what,” an angry voiced demanded behind them. “Tiny, why in the hell is my woman in your arms? What are the two of you hiding from me?”

“Calm down, buddy,” Tiny said as he placed her feet back down on the kitchen tile. “Amerie was telling me something pretty amazing and in my excitement I picked her up. Don’t read any more into it.”

Taking off his apron, Tiny folded it up and laid it on the kitchen counter. “I’m heading into town to pick up some items. I’ll be gone for a while. I hope the two of you can stay out of trouble while I’m gone.”

Before leaving Tiny placed his hand on her shoulder and stared into her face. "Don't forget to take my advice. I swear to you that you'll be glad that you did."

Amerie stared into Tiny's kind eyes for no longer than a second but she saw the truth there. Kyle was really the man she could give her heart to without any regrets. He wasn't going to turn into Deacon or Blade. He wasn't going to abuse her like her mother had been since she graduated from high school, but could she really get over her fear of marriage and commit completely to Kyle?

"Okay... I'll do it," she promised Tiny.

"Good girl." Tiny winked at her before taking his hand off her shoulder. He took a quick glance at Kyle and then left the room.

"What does Tiny want you to tell me?" Kyle demanded. "What were you doing in his arms when I came back into the kitchen? How could you be that close to him after the night we spent at the cabin? I swear if he thinks you're going to be with him, I'll fire his ass first and make sure he doesn't land another job in this town. Is Tiny the man you really want to be with and you were using me like all of the others?"

The hurt in Kyle's voice broke Amerie's heart. Her tormented past didn't compare to the wonderful man in front of her at all. Kyle had dated some horrible women in the past, but she was about to change all of that. Tiny was right. Kyle needed to hear the words but more than anything he needed to feel them.

Looking Kyle directly in the eyes, Amerie spoke the words she had felt for a while, but kept a secret out of fear of rejection or being dominated. She wasn't quite sure which one it was.

"I love you." Amerie liked how the words sounded coming off her lips.

She never thought that she would ever tell a man those three words. However, Kyle's silence was scaring her because she thought he would be pulling her into his arms. Instead he was just standing there staring at her.

"Don't you have anything to tell me?" she asked, trying to draw something out of Kyle but he still stood here like a frozen statue.

Fine!

Amerie was wrong and so was Tiny. Kyle didn't care that she was in love with him. She just poured her heart out to him, but Kyle hadn't spoken a word to her. So she would take his blistering silence as her a rejection to the words she had just spoken. Kyle thought she was good

enough to sleep with, but not to love and now that he had gotten what he wanted the most he was done with her.

Yeah, he told her at the cabin he loved her...but didn't every man tell a woman that to get her back into his bed? She wanted to hear the words when they weren't near a bed or half-naked.

"I should have known to keep my mouth shut. I'm going upstairs to pack. Tiny was wrong. You don't give a damn that I'm in love with you," Amerie complained as she tried to brush past Kyle, but his hand shot out stopping her. He wrapped his fingers around her arm, so she couldn't move.

"Let go of me," Amerie yelled, pulling at her arm. "I'm done talking to you. I want to leave."

"No," Kyle said, looking down into her eyes. "I want to tell you something and you will stay here and listen to me, Amerie."

"If you think you can tell me..." Amerie didn't get to finish the rest of her rant because Kyle tossed her over his shoulder and carried her from the kitchen.

"Put me down this instant!"

Ignoring her outburst, Kyle went up the steps and kept heading toward his bedroom at the very end of the hallway. Opening the door with his free hand, Kyle walked inside and closed the door locking it behind him.

Amerie was pissed!

How dare Kyle bring her up to his bedroom? Did he really think she was interested in having sex with him? It wasn't five minutes ago that she confessed to Kyle she was in love with him and he said nothing. There was nothing he could say or do that would change how hurt she was feeling. Kyle was the first man she'd ever told she was in love with and he didn't give a damn about it. Now the arrogant asshole better put her down.

"Kyle, put me down. I'm not telling you again," Amerie demanded, hitting him on the back with her fists.

Slowly, Kyle slid her down the length of his hard body making her want him despite the fact she was saddened by his lack of response to her confession. Well, it wasn't going to work. She wasn't about to give him the time of day again.

"Tell me again," Kyle said.

"I have nothing to say to you," Amerie tossed back folding her arms over her breasts. "Unlock the door so I can leave."

“You aren’t going to leave this room until I’m good and ready to let you.” Kyle kicked off his shoes and then snapped open the buttons on his checkered shirt. He pulled it off tossing it on the floor behind him. Seconds later, the rest of his clothing was lying in a pile behind him and he was standing naked in front of her showing off his perfect body that she would never get enough of.

“I want to hear the words again and this time I want you to use my name.” Kyle slowly stalked towards her and Amerie walked backwards trying to ignore how *good* Kyle’s chiseled chest looked.

“Why should I?” she asked as the back of her legs bumped the edge of the bed. She barely caught herself before she fell backwards onto the mattress.

Reaching out, Kyle pushed her gently causing her to fall and the instant her body hit the mattress Kyle covered it with his. When she tried to push Kyle off of her, he grabbed her hands and pulled her arms above her head.

“Woman, don’t play with me. Tell me you love me again. You just can’t blurt that out to a man and not expect to repeat the words.”

Amerie was going to prolong Kyle’s agony until she looked into his eyes. His eyes were filled with a deep longing like he hoped her words were true, but he wasn’t going to hold out hope like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop destroying his happiness.

After what Tiny had told her about Kyle’s past, she couldn’t torment him anymore by not telling him what he wanted to hear.

“Kyle, I love you. I’m in love with you and I have been for a while. You’re the only man I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

Suddenly, the longing disappeared from Kyle’s eyes and they were brimming with tenderness and passion turning him into a totally different man.

“Sweetheart, you don’t know how happy you’ve made me,” Kyle confessed before he kissed her.

Instead of devouring her mouth like he usually did Kyle took his time stroking the tip of his tongue along the lining of her upper lip like he was relearning the taste of her mouth.

Leaving her lips, Kyle ran his tongue down the side of her neck until it connected with her shirt. “Take it off,” he whispered. “I don’t want anything between your skin and my tongue.”

Amerie wanted the same thing, but she couldn’t do anything with Kyle’s body on top of hers. “You have to move so I can do it.” She was

dying to get her clothes off too. She loved how her bare skin felt pressed against Kyle's. Kyle moved enough for her to pull the shirt over her head. She dropped it on the floor next to the bed.

"This too," he said, touching the strap of her black bra.

She unhooked the front of the bra, pulled it down her arms and added it to the pile. "There you go."

"Fuck, I have never seen anything more beautiful in my life," Kyle whispered as he ran his palm over her nipples.

Sucking in a breath, Amerie fell back against the pillows allowing Kyle's body to recover hers. A pool of moisture formed between her thighs and her body started to tingle like crazy.

Kyle licked and sucked at her hard nipples until she moaned softly moving her head back and forth on the fluffy pillow. A whimper tore from her throat when Kyle took his mouth away from her aching breast and moved on to the other one.

Amerie squirmed underneath the warm weight of Kyle's body. Desire raced through every single cell in her body.

"Baby, are you going to be mine forever?" Kyle raised his head to stare at her with desire-filled eyes. His hands worked at the button and zipper on her skirt before pulling them down her legs along with her red and black bikini cut panties.

She could only nod.

"Answer me," Kyle urged as he slipped the tip of his cock inside of her.

Amerie moved her hips trying to get Kyle's cock deeper into her, but he placed his hand on her hips stopping her. "Please," she begged, shamelessly.

"Give me what I want and I'll give you what we both are dying for."

Amerie looked Kyle directly in the eye, so he wouldn't misunderstand. "Yes, I want you. I want to be with you forever."

He didn't give her the chance to finish before he pushed forward pushing his cock deep inside of her. It hadn't been that long since she had made love to Kyle, but it felt so good and new, the kind of *good* that Amerie wanted to feel for the rest of her life.

Kyle dropped his head against her shoulder as he thrust further into her as far as he could reach.

"Sweetheart, you feel so perfect." He braced his arms on either side of her head and he worked his body in and out of hers.

Wrapping her arms around him, she ran her fingers down his sweaty back tugging him even closer to her until they were skin to skin. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her head thrashed back and forth on the pillow.

Amerie didn't want to this to end. She didn't think it was possible for Kyle to top what happened at the cabin, but he was doing it here in his bedroom during the middle of the day. There was something hot and sexy about making love while the sun was shining through the window and Kyle's employees were right outside working, oblivious to what they were doing inside.

Kyle was only the second guy she'd slept with. She'd had too much going on after her mother married Deacon.

"Kyle," she whispered, raking her nails down his back.

Kyle stopped, his eyes locking with hers. "That's right. You're with me and I'm the only man you're going to be with for the rest of your life."

"Yes, I'll be with you," she replied.

"You'll marry me?"

Amerie's heart stopped beating at Kyle's proposal. Marry him? No...she wasn't ever going to get married. She wouldn't put herself in the same situation as her mother. A man would never own her...but she wouldn't tell him that now.

Instead, she pulled his head down and kissed him slipping her tongue into his mouth. Kyle allowed her to control the kiss for a few minutes before he took control and thrust harder into her sending her body closer to her climax. The tingling was starting in her back. She was so close.

Kyle continued his movements like a man who wasn't going to give up until he had her exploding in his arms. Amerie tore her mouth away and screamed as her release shot through her body. Her orgasm ripped through her like an erupting volcano and all she could do was let it happen.

Seconds later, Kyle shouted his release as he came deep inside of her. Light kisses were pressed to her face and mouth as he came down from his release and his breathing slowly returned to normal. Slowly, Kyle separated their bodies and pulled her against him.

"That was better than the first time. Maybe it comes from being in love with the woman I'm making love to," he whispered by her ear.

Shocked by Kyle's words, Amerie flipped over in the bed so she could look Kyle in the eye. "You're really in love with me?" she asked,

clearly shocked. “You just aren’t telling me this because you enjoy having me in your bed?”

“Darling, I wouldn’t have proposed to you if I wasn’t.” Kyle grinned at her. “Now, let’s get some sleep and we can talk more about it after we wake up.” Pulling a sheet over their naked bodies, Kyle wrapped his arms around her waist and tugged her closer to him.

Amerie didn’t know how long she laid in the bed thinking about Kyle’s proposal, but she knew that she had to get out and get some fresh air. She thought Kyle had only asked her to marry him because they were making love. Now that she knew he was serious it scared the hell out of her.

She slowly removed Kyle’s arm off her waist and rolled out of the bed making sure not to wake him. She wasn’t ready to talk about this yet with him. She needed time to herself to get her thoughts straight. Going around the room, she picked up some clothing and got dressed. Since her shirt was near Kyle’s side of the bed, she grabbed his, put it on and eased out of the room.

As she went past the kitchen, she peeked in and noticed that Tiny was inside working on homemade biscuits. Amerie would love to talk to him but this was something that she needed to sort out for herself.

So, she eased out of the side door and made her way towards the barn. This time of the day was when Kyle’s workers usually took a break into town to pick up supplies. She could go in the barn and have at least an hour to herself which was what she needed.

Walking to the far side of the barn, Amerie rested her arm on a stall and looked out the small window that gave her a good view of an old oak tree and a pond. She was waiting for Kyle to take some time out of his day to have a picnic with her in that spot.

God, what was she going to do about what he asked her?

He really wanted her to walk down the aisle with him? Hadn’t he been listening to her when she talked about how her mother’s marriage was with Deacon? How could she be sure that Kyle wouldn’t turn into him after he put a ring on her finger?

Yes, she loved Kyle with everything in her. However, she never planned on getting married. Sure, she had dreamt about it but that was before her mother brought Deacon into their lives. A marriage license

gave a man complete control over a woman and she couldn't let that happen. How did she not know that Kyle might realize his mistake after saying 'I do' and want a way out?

No, she would just tell him the truth and he would understand. It wasn't like she didn't still love him. She loved him enough not to put him through the pain of being married to her.

The sound of something whizzing past her ear caught Amerie's attention. "What in the hell?" she shouted as she glanced in front of her and her heart caught in her throat as she noticed a knife.

"NO!" Amerie cried as she backed away. It couldn't be. Spinning around, she started to run out of the barn, but froze in her tracks when a figure stepped out from one of the stalls. "Hello, sweetness," Blade said, grinning at her. "Do you know how much I've missed you?"

Chapter Twenty-One

Amerie knew that to be able to get out of the barn she had to get past Blade and he wasn't going to allow her to go anywhere until he was good and ready for it. Blade loved when a person showed him fear; it gave him power.

She tried not to show him how scared out of her mind that she really was. How in the hell did this psycho find out where she was? The only person who knew her whereabouts was Stuart...

"What have you done to Stuart?" she yelled rushing up to Blade. All of the fear she was feeling earlier was gone. Stuart would never give her up unless something happened to him or worse, to her mother.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Blade taunted. "That little bastard got what he had coming to him and so did that bitch of a mother of yours. She was a waste of my time and I should have begged Deacon to let me get rid of her a long time ago."

The slap hit Blade's face before Amerie could stop her hand. She didn't have time to move before Blade grabbed her upper arms and jerked her hard against his chest.

"You little bitch!" He growled in her face as his fingers bit into her arms. "I swear if Deacon hadn't warned me against hurting you..."

"Let me go," Amerie screamed, twisting around in Blade's tight grip. "I'd rather die than to have your hands anywhere on my body."

Blade's eyes flashed before he leaned down closer to her face. "Keep it up and I'll have to cut up your new boyfriend...what's his name...Kyle?"

Amerie stopped struggling as Blade's threat soaked into her head. He wouldn't think twice about hurting Kyle or worse killing him. Blade only cared about one person and that was himself.

"Do I finally have your attention now?" Blade whispered his hot breath hitting her face.

"Yes. What do you want from me?" Amerie asked. "What do I need to do so you won't hurt Kyle? He has nothing to do with this."

Letting go of one of her arms, Blade ran the tips of his fingers across her lips. It took everything in her not to take a chunk out of his finger with her teeth. If she did, there was no telling how Blade might get back at her.

She couldn't afford to take a chance like that. Not if she still didn't know for sure if Stuart and her mother were alive or dead.

"What I want from you doesn't matter right now. I'll get my pleasure after Deacon gets done with you. I can wait until then." Blade's mouth landed on her and he slipped his tongue inside her mouth before he let go of her arm and then took a step back.

Amerie controlled herself from wiping her hand across her mouth. She couldn't let Blade see how sick she was from his kiss. It would only fuel his anger and then he might go and take it out on Kyle.

"Fuck...you taste good," Blade growled. "I wish I could spend some more time with you in one of these stalls, but Deacon wants to see you. He's missed his precious step-daughter. He wants to reunite his family."

Hell would freeze over before Blade would have a chance to do anything else with her, but Amerie pushed the first part of Blade's comment to the back of her head as the rest set in. Did she hear Blade correctly? Was her mother still alive? Did that mean Stuart was alive too?

"Is my mother still alive? I want to see her!" She demanded not caring if she pissed Blade off or not.

Sliding his hands into his pockets, Blade yanked out a small knife and waved it in her face. "I'm not going to tell you again to stop acting like a little bitch. Haven't I warned you about demanding things you shouldn't from me? However, if you want to know if your mother and that dumbass Stuart are still alive you better meet me under that big oak tree by the pond in thirty minutes. Tell your boyfriend you're done with him."

"I'm not going to tell Kyle anything of the sort. I love him and he loves me."

"Oh, you better do as I tell you or Kyle and that buddy of his are going to die a slow painful death. It's all left up to you, sweetness." Blade tapped the edge of the knife against the side of her cheek and then walked away whistling as he disappeared into the woods near the barn.

Amerie fell to her knees as she let the last ten minutes wash over her body. Blade and Deacon had finally found her. She wasn't sure if her mother or Stuart even were still alive and the only way she could find out was to make a deal with the devil.

How could she go back into the house and make Kyle believe she wasn't in love with him? Was she that good of an actress? She had to be to save the man she loved more than anything in this world.

Getting up off the ground, Amerie brushed the dirt and hay from her clothing. She could do this. Squaring her shoulders, Amerie slowly made

her way back across the yard and into the house. She didn't even bother to stop when Tiny yelled at her from inside the kitchen as she continued upstairs.

Opening her bedroom door, she went inside and quickly closed it behind her. She didn't have much time to pack and get out of the house before Kyle came looking for her. Hurrying over to her closet, she pulled her suitcase from the back. She tossed it on the bed staring at it for a few minutes hating what she was about to do.

How could she leave the ranch after she had come to consider this place her home?

Maybe she should find Kyle and tell him about Blade's threat. Kyle would do everything in his power to help her even put his life on the line. No...she wouldn't let him sacrifice himself like that for her.

Amerie quickly shoved the thought her head. Kyle couldn't and wouldn't get hurt because of her. It was past time that she stood up for herself. Glancing at the clock, she noticed that she only had twenty minutes left to get to the tree at the other side of the ranch. How Blade and Deacon knew about that spot she didn't have clue, but she would go there.

She quickly packed what she had in the suitcase. She didn't have time to waste trying to pack neatly. She had to get out of here and the sooner the better. In the back of her mind, she was worried about not going to Kyle for help, but it would be for the best in the end.

After she found out if Stuart and her mother were alive, she would find a way to get away from Deacon. She would come back to Kyle and her life here, if he decided to take her back. Picking up her small suitcase, Amerie hurried towards the door, she opened it and ran right into Kyle's hard chest.

"Baby, there you are," Kyle said, grinning at her. "I wondered..." his voice trailed off as his eyes landed on the suitcase in her hands before darting back up to her face. "What are you doing?"

Don't break. I have to do this for his sake and everyone else's.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I'm leaving. I can't stay here any longer." Amerie tried to move past Kyle, but he stepped in her way blocking her path.

"You aren't going any damn place," he snapped. "Tell me what in the hell is going on with you. This morning you were in my bed telling me how much you loved me and now out of the fucking blue you try to tell me you're going to leave me? I don't think so. Sweetheart, whatever it is we can work it out."

Amerie blinked away tears at the love in Kyle's voice. How could she break his heart without ripping her own to shreds? "There's nothing you can do. You wanted me gone so now you're getting your wish."

"That was a long time ago, Amerie. You know our relationship has changed since then. I'm in love with you and I want to marry you. Did I do something to upset you? Just tell me what it is and I'll do my best to fix it."

God, why did he have to be like this? She was having a hard time not blurting out the truth, but she wasn't going to do it. Blade would make good on his threats.

"Kyle, stop begging. I can't stand it. Why don't you get it? I don't want you and I never have," she lied.

Kyle's eyes narrowed until they were almost slits. "Stop lying, right now. I know you love me."

"I don't," Amerie denied. "I was only pretending to get closer to Stuart. He's the one that I want not you."

"You're lying," Kyle shouted as his hands reached out and grabbed her by the upper arms. She flinched as his fingers touched the same spot Blade's had earlier.

Letting go of her arms, Kyle pulled up her sleeve allowing him to see the finger print marks she knew that Blade had left on her arm. "Who did this to you?" he demanded.

"It doesn't matter. I need to go. You're holding me up."

Wrapping his hand around her wrist, Kyle dragged her down the hallway and into his bedroom. He slammed the door locking it behind

him. "You aren't going anywhere until you tell me who in the hell grabbed you so fucking hard."

Amerie dropped the suitcase and ran up to Kyle. She had to get him to move. Her thirty minutes were almost up and she needed to get out of this house.

"It's not important," Amerie said. "All that's important is I have leave. Move out of my way."

"Was it Tiny?" Kyle questioned. "Is that why you don't want to tell me? I know that I saw you in the kitchen with him earlier. Did you not do something that he wanted and that's why he grabbed you? I don't care if we have been friends for over twenty years. I'll get rid of him just like I did Walter. Was it one of the other workers here? Tell me!"

Shaking her head, Amerie moved back from Kyle. Shit! He was going to ruin everything if he didn't move out of her way right now.

"No, it wasn't Tiny," she answered, frustrated. "He wouldn't ever do something like that to me. I don't know why you thought he would. Now will you move?"

"Amerie, you're not leaving this room until you tell me what's going on." Kyle crossed his arms over his wide chest and leaned back against the door.

"I've already told you. I don't want you. I never did." Amerie prayed that Kyle believed her.

"Sorry, sweetheart that lie isn't going to work. I know you love me just as much as I love you. Now tell me the truth."

"I can't," Amerie said. "Why don't you just drop it and let me leave? Why can't you understand that I don't want to be here with you anymore?"

Moving away from the door, Kyle unlocked it and flung it open causing it to slam against the wall. "Fine, I'm not going to plead with you. Leave," he shouted. "I really don't give a damn anymore. I've never had to fight to be with a woman and I won't start now with you."

Amerie's heart caught in her chest at Kyle's words. She knew that he was angry with her, but that was better than him being dead. Rushing for the door, she started out only to be stopped by Kyle touching her on the arm. Looking up, she stared into the eyes of the wonderful and caring man she had fallen in love with in such a short period of time.

"This is your last chance to tell me what's going on, Amerie," he said, softly. "Once you go out that door it's over between us."

Tears filled Amerie's eyes as Kyle's words hung in the air between them. He was right, when she left with Blade and Deacon there was no way that she could come back here. It didn't matter how much she might try. They would make sure it never happened.

Standing on her tiptoes, Amerie kissed Kyle quickly and then moved back before he could deepen it. "Please remember that I do love you and I did this for you. I won't have to worry about them hurting you now." Amerie rushed out of the room and down the hallway. She was out the front door before Kyle made it to the first step.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Amerie rushed to the meeting point praying that she wasn't too late. She knew Blade and if she was even a minute late he wouldn't have a problem killing Stuart or her mother. Hell, she wasn't for sure if they were even still alive, but she was going to hold out hope that they were.

Deacon and Blade were both bastards, but surely they wouldn't kill two innocent people for nothing. God, she sent up a silent prayer that both of the people that she loved were still alive.

Amerie stopped a couple of feet from the oak tree and looked around but she didn't see Blade. Damn it! Where was he? She glanced down at the watch on her arm and saw she had two minutes to spare.

"Blade, where in the hell are you?" she hollered. "I wasn't late you SOB."

"Wow...Is that the kind of language your mother taught you or did you learn it from Kyle? I bet it was that old rancher Kyle," Blade accused as he stepped from behind the tree.

"Where's Deacon?" Amerie demanded rushing up to Blade. "Tell me!"

"You've always been a little impatient haven't you, sweetness. That's something I'll have to break once your pretty little ass is back home where you belong." Blade's eyes glazed over as they ran up and down over her body like he was stripping her naked.

Amerie stayed still making sure not to show Blade how much he was disgusting her. He didn't need to know the power he had over her. She was the one going to be in control this time, not him. "I'm not going anywhere with you until you answer my questions."

She was dying to run back to Kyle for help, but she wasn't going to do it. She was done running. If she didn't stick up for herself now with Blade then it wasn't ever going to happen and he would continue to have power over her and her mother.

"If you want to see your old buddy and your stupid mother, you'll have to follow me," Blade taunted as he moved away from the tree.

Amerie stood frozen as she looked at Blade walk away from her. Did she really have enough courage to follow behind him and not know what

she was getting herself into? Could she actually trust Blade even a little bit? Was he just setting her up to hurt her later?

As much as she was nervous about following behind Blade she had to do it for everyone she loved including Kyle. She knew that Blade wouldn't be here without Deacon. Deacon paid him too much money for him to be out looking for her on his own. Deacon was here at the ranch. She could feel it, so she didn't have a choice but to do as Blade instructed her.

"I'm not going to tell you again," Blade yelled at her.

"Stop screaming at me," Amerie shouted back. "I'm coming." She followed behind Blade but she made sure to keep enough distance between them just in case Blade tried something.

The more Amerie walked the more familiar the surroundings started to look until she realized where Blade was taking her. He was taking her to the cabin which meant Stuart had to be alive because neither Blade nor Deacon would have been able to find where she and Kyle had stayed without him.

Blade stopped at the door and looked back over his shoulder at her. "Well, here we are, sweetness. Are you ready for your surprise?" he asked waving towards the closed door.

"Are you telling me that my mother and Stuart are inside?" Amerie demanded.

"Maybe or maybe not," Blade smirked. "You have to walk through this door to find out. Do you have enough guts to do it?"

Amerie sensed deep down that she could be walking into a trap but she didn't care. All that mattered was she found out who was on the other side of that door. If her mother and Stuart needed her help then she was going to give it to them. Her mother had put up with a lot for her and she was going to do everything she could to repay the agony she had been living through with Deacon and Blade.

"Blade, you're such a bastard. I hope you die a horrible and painful death."

"Amerie, if I go I'll make sure to take someone you care about with me," Blade tossed back. "Now, are you going inside the cabin or not?"

Moving closer, Amerie banked the last of her fear as she came within touching distance of Blade. "I'm ready. Open the door and let me go in there. I want and need to see what is on the other side." *This was it.* Blade and Deacon weren't going to rule her life anymore.

Pushing open the door, Blade moved to the side and waved her inside. "There you go, Amerie and remember be careful what you ask for."

Amerie closed her eyes and sent up a silent prayer before she walked past Blade into the cabin. She stopped in her tracks at the sight of Deacon sitting in a chair by the fireplace. She hated that he was sitting in the place where she and Kyle had made love for the first time with a sickening smile on his attractive face.

"Hello, Amerie," Deacon said. "It's so good to see my stepdaughter. I thought I would never see you again. You know how much family means to me."

"You bastard," Amerie yelled as she raced towards Deacon, but she didn't get very far because Blade grabbed her by the elbow and yanked her back.

"Don't touch me," Amerie jerked her arm away from Blade. "Tell me where Stuart and my mother are. I know you'd never have found this cabin without help from Stuart. Now, where is he?"

Deacon got out of the rocking chair strolling towards her like he didn't have a care in the world. "I see that living with Stuart's brother hasn't tamed your smart mouth, but I'll get you under control like I have your mother." He reached out to touch the side of her face, but she slapped his hand away.

"Don't," Amerie snapped, moving her head away from his unwanted touch. "Where are my mother and Stuart? I'm not going to ask you again."

"I'm sick of you whining about Stuart and my bitch of a wife," Deacon growled. "Blade, go and get those two out of the bedroom, so Amerie will shut the fuck up about them."

Spinning around, Amerie stood back and watched as Blade disappeared into the bedroom. She waited anxiously for him to come back with Kyle's brother and her mother.

Two minutes later a beat-up and bloody tied-up Stuart appeared followed by her mother who was sporting a black eye. The anger Amerie felt boiled over as she looked at them and how bad their condition was.

"Stuart, Mama," Amerie screamed as she ran past Deacon up to Stuart. She tried to untie the ropes from around his wrists but they were too tight.

"Mama, are you okay?" she asked trying not to cry. She hated Deacon and Blade with a passion she didn't know she could have.

"Sweetheart, I'm okay," Olivia said, looking at her with her good eye. "I'm just glad you're okay." Stepping closer to her, her mother ran her

hand down the side of her arm. “Stuart told me that you were safe and I’m so thankful that you were.”

“Amerie, I’m so sorry that I told Deacon and Blade about Kyle. I promised to keep you safe and I failed you,” Stuart jumped in surprising her with his confession.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Amerie's eyes swung back to Stuart trying to hold in tears at how bad he looked. His white shirt was covered in dried blood and hanging off his body showing the small cuts that covered his chest and arms. It looked like he had gone several painful rounds with Blade and lost every time. How could she blame him for telling where she was? She would rather have him alive instead of dead. With the mean streak that Blade had, he would have killed him to get the information about her whereabouts.

"Oh, shut the fuck up," Blade shouted shoving Stuart in the back. "Get in the living room. I'm tired of this sickening family reunion. Deacon and I didn't come here for that."

Amerie watched as Stuart stumbled into the living room followed by her mother and then Blade. She had to find a way to get them all out this mess. She had a bad feeling that Deacon was talking about taking all of them back home, but it wasn't going to happen. If she learned one thing when she had lived under his roof was that Deacon wasn't to be trusted.

"Why doesn't everyone take a seat?" Deacon suggested waving his hand towards the couch and several empty chairs in the room. "I want to say something before I hit the road with my wife and run away stepdaughter."

"Olivia and Amerie aren't going anywhere with you," Stuart shouted as he rushed towards Deacon. "I won't let you hurt them anymore."

"Stuart, don't!" Amerie screamed as Blade pulled a knife from behind his back and ran after Stuart. She tried to grab Blade's arm, but he shoved her back knocking her down on the hard wood floor.

"I'm tired of your mouth and it's time I put an end to it," Blade yelled at Stuart as she struggled to get to her feet.

Just as Blade lunged to stab Stuart in the middle of his back, Amerie screamed. She watched in horror as her mother jumped in the way and the knife plunged into her side. Screams filled the room as her mother fell to the ground in pain holding her side blood pouring out staining the pink shirt she was wearing.

"Fuck!" Deacon hollered as he jumped up from the rocking chair as Blade moved back from mother. "What in the hell did you just do!"

Scrambling up from the floor, Amerie threw herself on Blade's back hitting him as hard as she could. "You bastard. You killed my mother." She wasn't on Blade a minute before she was yanked off by Deacon and thrown on the ground. He kicked her once in the stomach knocking the wind out of her.

"Stay down there if you know what's good for you," Deacon warned before he moved away from her. "Come on," he screamed at Blade before racing towards the door. "We have to get out of here. I don't think that Olivia has much time left from the looks of the blood on her shirt and I'm not about to go to prison for that piece of shit."

Blade glanced at her and then over at Stuart who was now leaning over her mother trying to apply some kind of pressure to her injury even with his hands being tied up. "What about these two?" he asked pointing at Stuart and then her. "We can't leave any witnesses. You know both of them will run their mouths as soon as they get back to that ranch."

Pausing at the door, Deacon cursed underneath his breath. "Shit! I didn't want to get into this kind of mess. You have to kill them too because you're right. Stuart and Amerie won't be able to keep quiet. After you're finished meet me at the car in the woods and then we'll make our way back to the airport and the plane. You have ten minutes. If you aren't there back then, I won't have a problem leaving you here."

As Amerie listened to Deacon telling Blade to kill them, she continued to take deep breaths while her eyes searched the room for a weapon. She wasn't about to let Blade take her's or Stuart's life without a fight. It might be too late for her mother, but she wouldn't let Deacon or Blade get away with killing her.

From the corner of her eye, Amerie noticed a poker lying by the fireplace. If she could just make it over to that, she might have a fighting chance against Blade but she would have to catch him off guard. She was plotting her plan when she heard Stuart's voice yelling at the two men in front of them.

"Neither one of you will get away with this," Stuart shouted as he struggled to get up from the floor beside her dying mother. "It doesn't matter if you kill all of us. Kyle will know you did it and hunt you down until he finds you."

"Don't count on it," Deacon laughed, harshly. "No one knows we're here but the two of you and it'll be days before anyone finds the three of you dead. Blade and I will be living on an island in paradise surrounded by beautiful women and none of you will be a memory in our minds."

“Blade, kill them quickly and I mean kill both of them,” Deacon instructed again as his hand reached for the door. “Don’t take any time having fun with Amerie. I know you might want to but it will only hold us up. You can find another woman to get freaky with on the island.”

“I wouldn’t open that door if I was you unless you want to get a bullet between the eyes,” a male voice warned coming from the direction of the bedroom behind them.

Several pairs of eyes darted in that direction and Amerie gasped when she saw the man she thought she would never see again standing there with a gun pointed directly at Blade.

“Kyle,” she whispered as she got to her feet holding her left side with her left hand.

No!

He couldn’t be here. How did he even know that she was in the cabin? She had to get him out of here before Blade killed him too. She knew that Blade had more knives on him, because he never went anywhere without at least four on his body. He had even showed them to her one day to keep her in line. He threatened to take one of them out and kill her mother if she didn’t do as he told her.

“What in the hell are you doing here?” Blade asked as he yanked another knife from underneath the front of his shirt. “I told Amerie not to mention we were here. Well, her big mouth is going to cost your life along with the rest of theirs.”

“I didn’t tell him,” Amerie swore as she inched her way closer to Kyle. All Blade needed was an opening with Kyle and he wouldn’t have a chance. Blade was a master at knives. She’d never seen him miss a target.

“You had to tell him something about us,” Blade accused waving his knife at them. “If you hadn’t he wouldn’t be here, but it doesn’t matter. I’m going to really love killing you last Kyle. I want you alive to see the deaths of your girlfriend and brother.”

Amerie couldn’t let Blade make good on his threats. There weren’t going to be any more deaths today. Her mother’s was enough. “Blade, you don’t have to do this,” she said, trying to reason with him. “You’ve killed enough.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Deacon shouted. “Kill them and let’s go. We’ve wasted enough time already. We need to go now.”

“I wouldn’t listen to him if I was you,” Kyle warned, softly. “I can promise you that I’ll have a bullet in you before that knife leaves your hand.”

Amerie hated hearing Kyle's threat because she knew that he wouldn't be able to do it. Deacon hired Blade for a reason and the reason involved that he was an ex-weapons specialist. Kyle would die right before her eyes like her mother and her heart wouldn't be able to take losing two people she loved in the same day.

"You smug bastard," Blade growled at Kyle. "Do you really think you can take me on? You're nothing but a worthless rancher living out in the middle of nowhere. I'll have this knife in your gut before the first tear leaves Amerie's pretty brown eyes."

"Are you really confident enough to take me on?" Kyle tossed back taking Blade's threat without flinching. "Let me see what you're made of."

"No!" Amerie screamed as she raced to get to Kyle but was knocked back on the ground by Stuart tackling her and covering her body with his.

"Get off me!" she hollered twisting her body underneath Stuart's heavier one.

"Keep still," Stuart whispered in her ear as he pressed her harder into the hardwood floor.

Seconds later she heard gun shots ring out all around her and then the sounds of bodies falling on the floor.

"KYLE!" Amerie cried. "Stuart, let me up!" She had to check on Kyle. Maybe he was just hurt and she'd be able to help him, but she couldn't do anything with Stuart on top of her holding her down. She didn't want his protection. They needed to check on his brother or was there a reason Stuart wasn't getting off of her.

Amerie's heart stopped in her chest as her worst fear raced through her body. Kyle was dead and now Blade was going to kill her along with Stuart. All of them were really going to be dead while her crazy stepfather and his bodyguard got away.

"Stuart, let Amerie up." Kyle's voice rang out breaking into her sudden fears and a second later Stuart was yanked off of her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“You’re alive,” Amerie screamed and she threw her arms around Kyle’s neck. She was thrilled that the man she loved more than anything in the world wasn’t lying dead at her feet. She didn’t know how it was possible that Blade hadn’t killed him but she didn’t care. All she cared about was that Kyle was in her arms safe and sound.

“Yeah, baby. I’m okay,” Kyle whispered against her neck as he hugged her closer to his hard body. “Don’t you know that I’m not ever planning on leaving you for anything in this world? I love you too damn much for that.”

Slowly, Amerie moved away from Kyle and glanced around the room. She gasped as her eyes landed on Blade and Deacon lying dead on the floor inches apart from each other with a single bullet hole in both their heads. She felt absolutely nothing at their deaths. Truly, she fought down the urge to go over and kick their dead bodies, but she didn’t do it. It was past time the two of them got what they deserved. It was long overdue.

“How is my mama doing?” Amerie asked as she glanced over at her mother. Stuart was kneeling next to her along with Tiny. “What’s Tiny doing here? I have to go over there and check on her. I need to know for sure if she’s dead or not.” She started over to her mother, but Kyle pulled her back.

“Wait...let Tiny take care of her. He has a lot of medical training. He knows what’s he’s doing,” Kyle told her.

Amerie glanced back at her mother lying so still on the floor and then at Kyle. “How did you know that Deacon and Blade were here? How did you find me at the cabin?”

Kyle looked over at her mother being worked on by Tiny and Stuart, whose hands were now untied, and then back at her. She didn’t like the feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. Was she right earlier and Blade had killed her mother?

“Is my mama really dead?” she asked as tears filled her eyes. “Blade killed her, didn’t he? God, I wasn’t able to save her!” Amerie tried again to go over to her mother, but Kyle pulled her back for a second time.

“Sweetheart, your mother isn’t dead. Tiny found a faint pulse. The ambulance is on its way, but she needs to stay still until it gets here.”

“She isn’t dead?” Amerie whispered as she brushed the tears off her face with the back of her hand. She couldn’t believe it. How was it possible? There was so much blood around her body. “I don’t understand. Look at all of the blood,” she said waving her hand towards her mother’s body.

“I don’t know how it’s possible, but let’s be thankful and allow Tiny to work his magic, but we need to stay out of his way.”

Grabbing her by the arm, Kyle led her into the bedroom away from the scene in the living room. She wanted to stay with her mother; however, if Tiny needed more room to save her then she would keep out of his way.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Blade and Deacon?” Kyle asked when they were far enough away from the other three people in the living room. “I know those two are the reason you ran away from the ranch. “Did you think you couldn’t confide in me? Or did you think I wouldn’t be able to save you from the two bastards that had been making your life a living hell?” Kyle let go of her arm and brushed the back of his hand across her cheek.

“I only figured out they had tracked you down here after you told me they wouldn’t be able to hurt me. God, baby, if Chuck hadn’t been out checking fences and seen you out by the oak tree with Blade then followed you half way to the cabin, I would still be looking for you. Do you know how I would have lost my mind if I’d found you in the cabin dead along with everyone else? I don’t think I could have gone on without you.”

Touching Kyle’s hand, Amerie moved it away from her face. “I did it for you to save your life. Don’t you understand I couldn’t let Blade or Deacon get their hands on you? I had to take care of my own problem myself. So many people have been taking care of me and I thought it was past time that I showed Deacon and Blade I wasn’t scared of them anymore. I was tired of them ruling my life. I needed to take it back from them.”

“Woman, don’t you understand that you could have been killed because you were trying to show your independence? Damn it! What if this had been a trap to kill you? I love you and it’s my job to protect you from men like Deacon, Blade or anyone else who threatens you. You can lean on me when you’re having problems. That’s what two people do who are in love with each other.”

"I love you too," Amerie replied. "However, they weren't your problem, they were mine. Why should you have to risk your life like that? My heart almost stopped when I thought you were dead. How could you do that to me? I told you how dangerous Blade was. He was a sick bastard and I'm glad that he's dead along with Deacon."

"Baby, I was in the military for almost twenty years with Tiny. We both were snipers. There was no way in hell that Blade would have hurt me. I had a bullet in Blade's head before he ever raised his hand to throw the knife. Seconds later, Tiny shot Deacon as he opened the cabin door. I warned him not to but he didn't listen and now he's dead."

Amerie moved closer to Kyle and ran the tips of her fingers across his firm mouth. She didn't think it was possible for her to love Kyle any more than she already did. He was everything to her and she planned on spending the rest of her life proving it to him in every way possible.

"You saved my life, your brother's and my mama. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't want to spend another day without you in my life."

A huge grin spread across Kyle's face and he never looked more handsome to her than at this moment. The other women in his past had been fools to let this amazing man slip through their fingers, but she was glad they had because Kyle was all hers now and she wasn't ever going to let him go.

"Does that mean you're going to accept my proposal now?" Kyle asked yanking her to his chest. "As I recall you left in a hurry to go and save your mother and Stuart before I got an answer and I'm ready to hear it now."

"Do you want to have babies?" Amerie asked, staring up into Kyle's eyes. She already knew the answer, but she wanted to hear the words from his mouth.

"Sweetheart, I live on a huge property and I'm going to need several little rug rats to help me run the place. So, sure why not. Let's have some babies."

"Kyle, stop that!" Amerie laughed hitting in on the arm. "Be serious. Would you like to have children?"

"Amerie, I never thought that I'd ever fall in love with a woman the way I did with you. You've given me so much and I know that our love will only be enhanced with the addition of beautiful babies. Yes, I want to have a lot of children and you're the only woman that I want to have them with. So, does this mean that you're going to marry me?"

“Yes... I’ll marry you,” Amerie answered, holding back fresh tears. “I’d marry you tomorrow if I could, but I have to make sure that my mama is better before we set a date. Do you mind if we have a long engagement?”

Shaking his head, Kyle slipped his fingers through her hair cupping the back of her head in his hands. “I wouldn’t think about having our wedding until I was sure your mother and my crazy brother were both healthy enough to attend. Yes, I can settle for a long engagement as long as I know that you’re going to be my wife in the end.”

“Kyle, you’re the most wonderful man in the world and I know that I didn’t start living my life until you came in it.”

“Baby, I feel the same away about you,” Kyle said as she heard the ambulance coming in the distance.

“You know that there’s no turning back now.” Amerie stared up at Kyle wondering if he could see the happiness in her eyes.

“I know and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

When Kyle lowered his head for a kiss, Amerie stood on tiptoes to meet him halfway. She never imagined all those months ago when she helped Stuart escape during the middle of the night, he would take her to his brother’s ranch and she would fall madly in love with the brooding rancher who she thought hated her at first sight.

Amerie knew that she would always be secure in Kyle’s arms and he would never allow anything or anyone to hurt her again. She was more than ready to see what the future held for the both of them because she knew their lives were only going to get better and better.

Epilogue

Two Years later

Pulling back the covers, Kyle climbed into bed next to his beautiful wife and pulled her back against his chest placing his hand over her very swollen stomach. "I don't think our son wanted me to tuck him in," he whispered into Amerie's ear. "I saw the disappointment on his little face."

"Honey, I don't think Schuyler gave you any kind of look," Amerie laughed, softly. "He's just turned one year old. He loves you just as much as he loves me. Besides, I was too tired to get up. Kraig is moving all over the place. I can't believe we're about to have another baby in three months.."

"Well...this is what usually happens when two people in love can't keep their hands off each other." Kyle ran his hand over the upcoming addition to his family and he couldn't wait to see his new little boy.

"Yeah, we're in love all right and that's why we're going to have two kids under the age of two years old, mister." Amerie moved around in the bed so she was facing him. "What I find so funny is that my mother and Stuart's baby is due two months before ours."

"Are you ready to be a big sister?" Kyle asked. "There's a huge age difference between you and this new baby."

"Well...my mother did have me when she was sixteen years old, so I guess I can handle being a big sister if she can handle being a new mom. I talked to Stuart yesterday and he's thrilled to death. He invited us over for dinner tomorrow night."

"I don't know if I'm up to driving all the way into town," Kyle complained. "Did Stuart say when their house was going to be ready out here? I still can't believe he bought the cabin from me, tore it down and then rebuilt on the same lot. It seemed like it would have bad memories for the two of them."

"I thought the same thing, but Mama told me that she couldn't let the demons of Deacon and Stuart haunt her any longer. She wanted to be out here closer to us and the kids, so they both decided that's what they wanted to do."

"Are they still haunting you?" Kyle asked, softly.

“No and they haven’t in a very long time.”

“Why not?”

“Because my amazing husband got rid of them a very long time ago and I haven’t thought about them since that day at the old cabin. It truly has been years since both of them have entered my mind and I plan on keeping it that away.”

“All I think about now is my handsome husband and the beautiful life he’s given to me. I never thought I’d find a man like you when I was running away with Stuart and even now I can’t believe that I’m not still dreaming about a better life.”

“Amerie, you’re really here with me and I know for a fact that this amazing life we have isn’t a dream,” Kyle said.

“How do you know that?” Amerie asked, grinning at her husband.

“The women I dreamt about were never as gorgeous and perfect as you are to me. I know years from now I’m still going to be grateful to my brother for bringing you here to me. He knew what I was missing even when I didn’t.”

“What was missing?” Amerie asked, placing her hand in the center of his chest.

“You,” Kyle whispered, staring adoringly into the eyes of his wife.

The End