

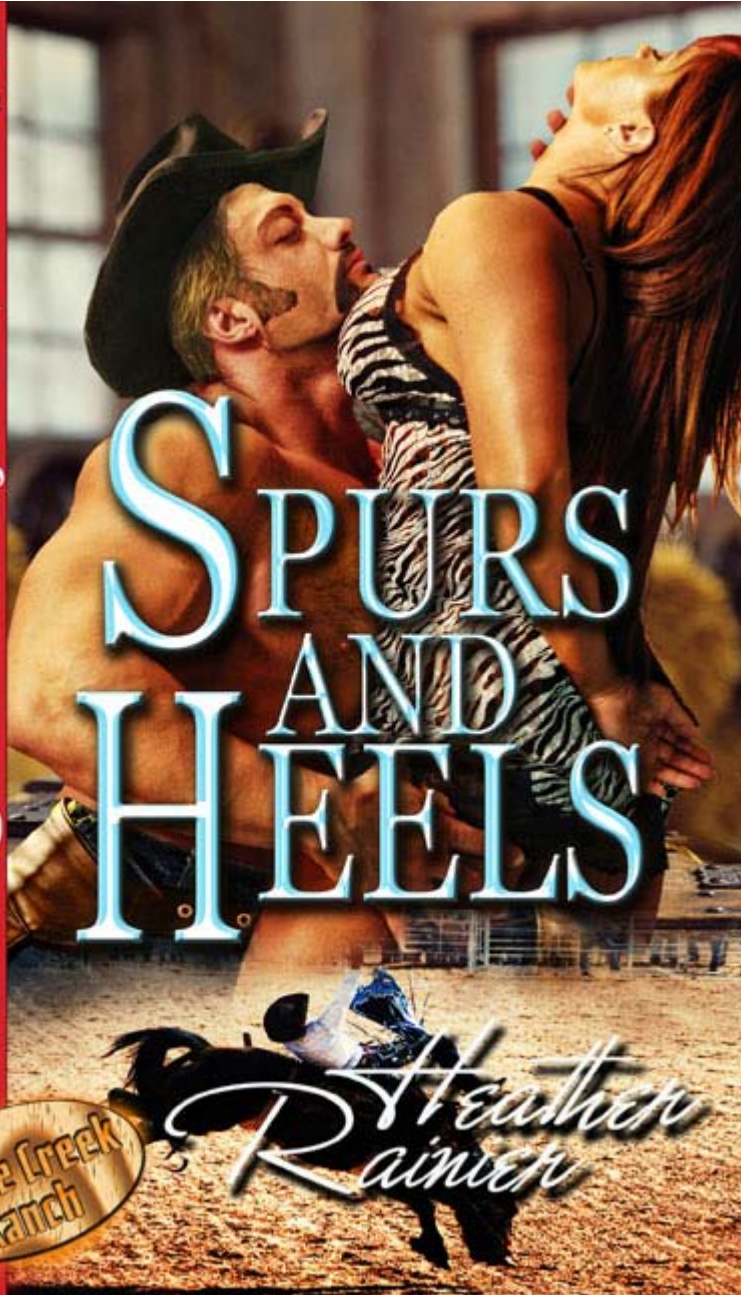
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SPURS AND HEELS

Divine Creek
Ranch

*Heather
Rainer*



Divine Creek Ranch 5

Spurs and Heels

Ash Peterson falls for her the moment he lays eyes on her. She's a stereotypical city girl, from her manicure to her high heels. Judging by the sparks that fly between them, he knows there's a fire burning deep inside the blue-eyed beauty. But department store manager Juliana Meyers is thrown by her attraction to Ash. Everything about this quintessential cowboy sets her on edge, from his Stetson and mutton chop sideburns down to his dusty boots and spurs. All he's gotta do is walk into a room with those damn things jingling and she's putty in his hands.

When Ash unintentionally injures Juliana, he feels that it's his responsibility to look after the hoity-toity redheaded workaholic. He pushes her to reexamine her perfectionist lifestyle, but it's hard for Juliana because she's used to doing things her way. Can she learn to relax and let him lead?

Note: This book contains anal sex.

Genre: Contemporary, Western/Cowboys

Length: 70,810 words

SPURS AND HEELS

Learn to Trust

Divine Creek Ranch 5

Heather Rainier

EVERLASTING CLASSIC



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DEDICATION

To my sweet, loving husband.

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SPURS AND HEELS

Divine Creek Ranch 5

HEATHER RAINIER

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Chapter One

Ash Peterson arched an eyebrow as he stood before Juliana Meyer. He crossed his thick, strong-looking arms over his broad chest as he leaned against the Warner's back-porch railing.

"Let me get this straight, Miss Meyer. You have a boyfriend, and he's at his mama's house in Vermont tonight?"

Juliana had sought a respite from the press of bodies inside the Divine Creek Ranch house, where Grace Warner's Christmas party was in full swing. Once outside, her quiet moment was interrupted by the big cowboy Grace had introduced her to a few minutes before.

"Yes, that's right." It sucked that Lawrence was out of town, but the way this rugged, handsome cowboy said it, it made her boyfriend sound like a jerk and a mama's boy. Years of working Christmas Eve and the day after Christmas had made her callous toward not taking time off during the holiday, but it was different when she saw her circumstances from someone else's perspective. It sounded as though Lawrence had deserted her. Technically, he had. He'd scheduled his vacation around the holiday—without her.

"Does he have a good, long visit with his balls while he's there?"

Juliana sighed. It didn't make any difference what this man thought. He wasn't the first or the last to criticize Lawrence for

leaving her over the holiday. It wasn't like she could join him. She'd spend a large portion of her single day off on a plane.

"Does he at least alternate and spend every other Christmas with you?"

"His mom says once he's married and has kids and she retires, she'll start coming to Texas for some of the holidays. Until then, she expects—"

Why in the world am I making excuses?

"Expects? How old is he again?"

"She expects for him to come to her," she finished, growing more and more irritated with this know-it-all buttinsky. "He's forty-four. Do you have a point?"

He put his tanned hands on his narrow, denim-clad hips and cocked his head at her. "He isn't much of a man if he leaves you alone on Christmas every year."

Matching his stance, Juliana said, "You don't know what it's like to have a relationship with someone who is in retail management during the holidays. For me, it's like there is no holiday. It's merely the impetus behind the busiest month of the year, my best opportunity to keep the store in the black for another year. When he goes, he has my blessing. I hardly even have time to—" She pressed her lips together and bit back the rest of her statement.

He cocked his head, his turquoise-blue eyes drilling into hers. "Have time to what? Miss him?"

Yes, damn it. Guiltily, she realized she'd hardly given Lawrence a thought tonight before Mr. Peterson had brought him up. However, she had given thought to how handsome Ash was with his big, thick biceps, muscular physique, and incredibly sexy muttonchop sideburns and moustache.

"That's none of your business."

"If you were my woman, I'd never leave you alone during Christmas, even if all you had was one day off. I'd make it *count*." He said the last word with extra emphasis. Juliana felt a warm blush steal

over her cheeks and hoped he couldn't see it in the dim light. He'd probably think it was because she was attracted to him, which would only irritate her further.

"Well, I'm not your 'woman,'" she replied haughtily, even using air quotes around the word as she emphasized it snidely, "and I manage fine."

"What about your family?"

"I see them at other times of the year. They understand that the holidays aren't a good time for me to visit." They were probably all sitting down to eat right now, three hours away in Tillman.

Truth be told, she had not been home at all this year. There was never a good time to take off for a few days. The last time she had a day off was Thanksgiving, and even then she'd worked part of the day in her office while the store was closed. It was less depressing than eating the evening meal alone.

Her phone buzzed in her handbag. Checking caller ID, Juliana said with little sincerity, "Sorry, it's Lawrence. I need to take this call."

"Listen, I'm sorry if I offended you—" Ash started to say, and she surprised herself by brusquely turning and taking a few steps away without hearing what else he had to say.

"Hello." She spoke with false cheer in her voice, thinking her mother would be appalled at her rudeness to that man. She heard the door open and close and assumed he walked back in the house.

"Juliana, we need to talk for a minute."

No "Merry Christmas." No inquiries how her day had been. She hadn't heard from him since the twentieth.

"What's up?" she asked as she settled in the old glider on Grace's back porch.

"Mom and I have been talking."

Her core muscles did an involuntary lockdown. Last time he'd said those words, he'd informed her he was taking his mom on a two

week Caribbean cruise, without her. The cruise had taken place over her birthday, and he didn't even send her a card.

"What have you and your mom been talking about?"

"I've maintained my real estate agent's license in Vermont all these years, and I've been presented with a lucrative opportunity. I'm going to take it."

Juliana wished she could say that she was stunned. Then she heard a woman's voice in the background say, "Tell her."

There was a rustling as if he'd put his hand over the mouthpiece while he carried on a secondary conversation.

"Are you there, Lawrence?" Juliana's heart was pounding because she knew already what came next. She'd suspected for a while. "Tell me what? Who is there with you?"

"Juliana, it's over between us. I've met someone here. She's the other reason I'm returning to Vermont."

She felt strangely numb to what he said, as if she were listening to some stranger's conversation. "I see. How long?"

"I'll be back to pack my house the day after tomorrow, and I'll be returning here immediately. Not long at all."

"No, you rat bastard. How long have you had a relationship with her?"

There was a long pause, during which she added up all the weekend business trips he'd taken this year and the longer than usual holiday breaks as well. The numbness centered in her chest and spread outward over her limbs.

"Since last year." His voice was void of any emotion.

Icy chills blanketed her skin. "And I allowed you in my bed, trusted you during that time."

"I always used condoms with her."

Juliana grated, "Well, I'm so glad you protected her, you lying, cock-sucking bastard." This was really going to hurt when she thought this conversation over later in the evening. She could feel it coming.

"I used condoms for your sake as well, Juliana. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but it never seemed the right time. You were always working. Always busy."

"Don't blame this on me. I have responsibilities, and you know that."

"Yes, you do. I'm sorry to have caused you any distress."

"You're sorry for causing me *distress*?"

"I'll swing by the store with your house key."

"Just put it in my mailbox. I can't believe you're doing this over the phone. No, wait, maybe I should be grateful you didn't text me with the news," she added over the lump growing in her throat. Lawrence was a heavy texter. There was another awkward pause, and then he sighed irritatingly. "You thought about it, though, didn't you?"

"It would have saved us this unnecessary emotionalism."

"Unnecessary emotionalism? Lawrence, I've been your girlfriend for five years, not a casual fuck. You mean it would have saved you the hassle of talking to me like a human being."

"There is no need to be coarse." Lawrence had always disliked her potty mouth, which she'd done her best to minimize around him. "I'll be by for my things in a couple of days."

"*Don't* come to my house. I'll box everything up and put it on your porch."

"Fine. Well...Merry Christmas. Good-bye."

"You are a horrible person for saying that and for doing this today, of all days." Juliana disconnected the call.

She looked at the backlit screen of her cell phone. The call had taken less than five minutes. Five minutes to uproot and discard five years of her life. Hell, who was she kidding? All they'd done was bridge the gaps between work and loneliness for each other. Then there was his mother. Maybe she should call him back and thank him for saving her from having to hear, "Mom and I have been talking," ever again.

Remaining seated in the dark, Juliana drew her calves up under her as Ash sat down on the glider. She didn't have to look up to know it was him because that was *just* her luck tonight.

"Here." He offered her an inch of whiskey in a shot glass.

Chuckling, she took it from him and tossed it back then handed him the glass. Tears welled in her eyes as her throat caught fire. "Thank you."

"You looked like you needed it."

"Did you hear?" She couldn't muster any indignation if he had.

"Only part of it. I'm sorry. I looked out here, and you looked upset and...I don't know. I thought the shot might help whatever was wrong. I didn't intend to eavesdrop."

"It's all right. It doesn't matter." She meant it, too. "I suppose it wasn't the most meaningful relationship in recorded history."

"Still, it's hard when someone leaves your life that you count on to be there." He said it in a kind tone with the hint of a Southern drawl. His voice did tingly things to her insides that were in direct contrast to the emotional storm growing inside her.

"I should go pack his things." He caught her hand as she rose from the glider and she turned to him. His hands were warm, the palms and fingertips callused. Lawrence's hands had been smooth, his nails manicured. Ash's touch shot a bolt of sensation through her body, centering in her rapidly warming core.

"You should stay and have fun. Have a few more drinks with me." His thumb stroked over her knuckles, sending repeating tingles up and down her spine, warring with the pain that was burgeoning in her chest. Her body felt at odds with itself, but the pain was starting to win out.

"Why?"

Make it quick, mister, because the clock is ticking down on my hissy-fit-o-meter. Did he take perverse pleasure in watching her fall apart?

“Because you can’t shut out the world. Those are your friends in there, right? I mean you know a bunch of them, don’t you? And now you know me. Don’t go home and hide.” His tone was soothing but challenging at the same time.

“Thank you for your advice, cowboy, but I know what I need right now. I need to clear him out of my life, out of my house.”

“Tomorrow is soon enough. Stay.” His persuasive voice was hard to ignore.

A lump formed in her throat, and muscles in her chest and shoulders grew tense as reality started to set in. She’d trusted Lawrence, and he’d cheated on her.

She wasn’t sure if the heat in her cheeks was from the whiskey or from her impending emotional breakdown, but she was sure she did not want to be in his presence for it.

“Let me go get Grace for you,” he whispered, patting her shoulder as he rose from the glider.

“No, I need to leave.” Juliana stood and picked up her purse. “If she asks, tell her I’ll call her this week.” She couldn’t even commit to calling her tomorrow because Juliana knew she’d be incredibly busy. All her friends were used to not hearing from her for days or weeks at a time. She was always busy. “Thanks for the drink, Ash.”

* * * *

Ash gently grasped her wrist. “At least tell Grace good-bye.” He might be a man, but he understood Juliana was fighting tears and wouldn’t want him to see her like that.

Trying to egg her on a little and get her to show some of the spunk and spirit he knew she hid beneath her cool exterior, he said, “Don’t run like a coward.” Unfortunately, she didn’t take it the way he planned.

“I am no coward, *Mister Helper*, and you can kiss my lily-white ass!” she hissed. She yanked her arm away from him and stomped down to the end of the wraparound porch.

Ash smiled as he watched that gorgeous redhead disappear from sight. He’d been partially successful. She’d shown that there was definitely a fire burning in there, but he’d not succeeded in getting her to stay. His consolation, however, was in watching the aforementioned ass twitch and sway as she angrily walked away.

“Mm-mm-mm. I’d gladly pay money to kiss that sexy ass.” He’d replay that lovely image in his mind later. *Left, right, left.*

She had a body that wouldn’t quit, she was newly single, and she had him hard as a steel pole. His cock didn’t appreciate being blocked, and he reminded himself she wasn’t the type to put out easily anyway. “Down, boy.”

* * * *

Juliana glumly stared at the box of Lawrence’s personal effects sitting on the chair opposite her desk when Leah Woodworth walked in, clipboard under her arm. Leah had graduated from Baylor University the month before and returned to Divine with a freshly inked degree in business management. Juliana was under orders from Doug Woodworth, the store’s owner and Leah’s father, to allow her to implement some of the knowledge she’d acquired. Doug wanted to put some of that book learning he’d spent so much money on to good use.

Juliana’s stress level increased with every change. Leah had *a lot* of ideas. She’d known Leah since she was a little girl and had even hired her to work at the store while she was a high school student. But her head was filled with theory, some of which was not proven in a small town environment.

“Hi, sweetie. What’s up?” Juliana asked as Leah sat down and smiled at her.

“Is Daddy making you crazy?”

Juliana chuckled and nodded. “A little, but he’s always done that. I agreed to try your ideas, but you have to give me solid proof before I lay a single soul off. I know you’ve been observing operations. Can I give you one piece of advice?”

“Sure!” Leah was a good-natured young woman, and Juliana could not fault her for wanting to put her degree to good use. After all, the store belonged to her family, and she only wanted the best for it. Understanding what was best might call for adjusting some of her ideas.

“Rather than spending time observing the employees, you should be getting to know them better. Half of them have known you since you were in diapers, but you’re making all of them nervous with this watching and taking notes routine,” Juliana said, gesturing to the clipboard in Leah’s hands.

“I promise I’ll do that, first chance I get. I have a manpower management newsletter to put together for them, with helpful hints for making more profitable use of the hours they spend here.”

“Um, okay.” Juliana had a sinking feeling she would come to hate the words “manpower management.” They discussed the layoffs Leah proposed, and Juliana had to admit the two employees that Leah pinpointed had not been pulling their weight, by her own observations.

All the documentation and paperwork was in place, and Juliana pinpointed a date in mid-January for the deed to be done. Nobody got laid off the week after Christmas. Juliana groaned when Leah once again brought up the sore subject of doing away with commission sales. Juliana had an excellent staff of well-trained sales people and knew that would pull the rug out from under them. She put the decision off until later, and Leah backed off—for now.

Juliana needed to get the box over to Lawrence’s front porch. She’d gone on a tear through the house the night before, finding all his things, surprised that the items filled only one box. After she’d

finished the clean-out, she'd sat down with a pint of java mocha ice cream and watched *Sense and Sensibility*, berating the female lead, Marianne, for choosing Willoughby over the faithful and steadfast Colonel. Juliana put on *Godzilla* instead. A pint of ice cream and two and a half hours later, she was numb and suffering from a sugar crash.

She didn't feel any better in the morning and was slightly nauseated from all the ice cream. After a breakfast taco, she felt much better, if still a little depressed. She felt no real loss, even over the fact that the son of a bitch had been cheating on her, merely an ever-growing irritation that she hadn't figured it out sooner.

Checking the time, she stood wearily from her desk and picked up the box as Evelyn, her Yoda-like right-hand person, cleared her throat. The elderly sprite stood in the office door, looking over her reading glasses, wearing a Cheshire cat grin. In her wrinkled little hands was a small arrangement of miniature roses and dark green foliage displayed in a floral teacup and saucer.

"Someone has an admirer," Evelyn announced in her uncharacteristically gravelly voice.

Juliana took the flowers from her. "Who are they from?" she asked, smelling the lovely yellow roses.

"Now how would I know that, missy?" Evelyn asked innocently as Juliana placed the arrangement on her desk.

Scoffing, Juliana eyed her and said, "Oh, *puh-lease*, don't bullshit a bullshitter."

"Who is Ash?" Evelyn asked, cutting the crap.

"Someone I met at Grace's last night. He had flowers delivered?" Interesting. She thought after her rudeness last night, he wouldn't want to have anything further to do with her.

"Actually, he delivered them himself. His card says, and I quote, 'Sorry, darling. I was just trying to help last night. Sincerely, Ash.' He also brought you lunch, and he's out in the store right now. I told him you had someone in your office, and he didn't want to interrupt you."

With a grin, she added, “I helpfully suggested that maybe you’d want to thank him yourself and that he should hang around a bit.”

Juliana couldn’t help but smile, looking at the flowers. He’d sort of stuck his foot in his mouth last night, but he’d had good intentions. The flowers did brighten her mood. Lifting the box containing Lawrence’s stuff, she stepped out of her office to go look for him while she tried to formulate an apology for her behavior the night before.

An employee stopped her to ask a question outside the hallway that led to her office. Answering the question, she was distracted by an unusual rhythmic sound and looked up the main aisle that ran the length of the store.

Walking toward her from the front of the store, looking like sex on a stick, was that tall, hot cowboy. She had to confess that he was a sight for sore eyes, dressed in faded blue jeans, dusty cowboy boots, a red Western shirt, a dark blue barn jacket, and his black felt cowboy hat. She realized from the telltale sound that he’d left his spurs on. Tingling heat spread over her cheeks, and she cursed her red hair and fair skin.

He walked down the aisle to her, a knowing smile in his eyes and on his lips. Her insides quivered, and she felt the heat in her cheeks spread to her clit. Despite her blush, she continued her perusal, her panties dampening slightly at the sight of the telltale bulge at his groin and the sound of his spurs. Why the sound of spurs could get her a little wet, she wasn’t sure. He chuckled as he came to a stop and extricated the box from her hands.

“Darlin’, you keep looking at me like that and *I* might start blushing. I don’t think I’d look quite as pretty doing it, though. What’s in the box?”

“It’s Lawrence’s things. I plan to drop them by his house this afternoon. I need to put it in my car.”

“Want me to put it in the dumpster instead?”

Juliana smirked. “Tempting offer. Thank you for the flowers and my lunch. That was thoughtful of you.”

“Just trying to make amends for upsetting you last night. I figure if you’re looking at me like you want to eat *me* for lunch, I must be forgiven. Yeah?”

Juliana knew she could’ve just laughed and said yes, made more light conversation, and maybe flirted a little with the good-looking cowboy. For some reason, his words had the opposite effect, angering her as did his egotistical assumption. Her emotions were on the ragged edge and she took it all out on him.

“Don’t think so highly of yourself, Mr. Peterson. I find that unattractive.” Snatching the box out of his hands, she strode away from him. Did he have to be so coarse? So egotistical? Did he *really* think so highly of himself? She heard his surprised exhalation of air, but he didn’t follow her as she flounced out the front door to take the damned box to her car.

Chapter Two

Ash grinned, enjoying the view as Miss High and Mighty Meyers sashayed away. His dick got even harder, watching those hips sway angrily. The sight of her turned him on like she was walking away naked, when in reality she was dressed in a matronly tailored blouse and a shin-length skirt and sensible heels. His dick asserted that it could have been a fricking burlap sack for all it cared.

“Oh, I like you, cowboy. You’ve got promise.”

He looked around and finally located the little elderly lady who owned the voice speaking to him. Damn, he didn’t realize how tiny she was. She must’ve had a stool behind the counter he’d stopped at earlier.

“I’m sorry, ma’am?”

“Oh, call me Evelyn. Juliana likes you. You can’t tell right now, I know. She has quite a temper to go along with her red hair. Some would call that passionate,” Evelyn said, enunciating with care as she walked up to him.

“I keep sticking my foot in my mouth.”

Evelyn chortled with amusement, “Yes, you do, cowboy. You have quite a way with words. But she likes you, just be patient. Her mind is on this breakup right now. She’s exhausted and oversensitive,” she said, shaking her head sympathetically.

“Well, Miss Evelyn. I need to get back to the ranch. Would you tell her that I didn’t mean anything by what I said? Just being mouthy?”

“I will, cowboy. Give her time. Oh! Just a little head’s up?” she said, gesturing with her little hands for him to come closer. “You

might want to know she'll be assisting Teresa on her moving day this Wednesday, packing up Teresa's personal effects while Teresa takes care of wedding plans. *Just in case* you want to volunteer to help."

Ash smiled at her and leaned way down to give her a kiss on the cheek. "You're a real sweetheart, Miss Evelyn. Maybe I should be courting you instead."

Evelyn chuckled with delight at his flirtation and confidently said, "Cowboy, if I was Juliana and forty years younger, I wouldn't have walked away from your sexy, smart mouth. I'd have given as good as I got. Back in the day, I had suitors pining for miles around."

"I'll bet you did, Miss Evelyn. You can call me Ash, by the way."

"Well, Ash, give her some time to cool off and start to feel bad about being so rude to such a handsome cowboy. She'll come around."

"You reckon?"

"A charmer like you? She'll come around." She shook her head slowly. "Juliana works too much." She blew him an air kiss, waved, and walked back down the aisle.

Grinning, Ash walked out the side door where he'd left his diesel running and made the trip back out to the ranch, feeling unsettled. He wasn't exactly disappointed but wasn't happy that he'd had to watch her walk away from him again.

* * * *

Juliana angrily threw the box in the car and shot from the parking lot in her white Camaro like a scalded-ass dog. Carrying the box up to the front steps of Lawrence's condo, she placed it in front of his door. Staring at it for a few seconds, she wondered why she'd invested five years in their relationship and all she had to show for it was one box.

She hated the little twist of guilt she felt when she looked at it and remembered his words. He'd all but called her a workaholic. She shared a small portion of culpability at the demise of their

relationship. Sure, he was a lying, cheating dickhead, but maybe there was some truth to what he'd said.

Juliana returned to the store and ate her now-cold lunch in miserable silence, grunting when Evelyn imparted Ash's message to her. *I am such a bitch*. She looked morosely at the cheerful yellow roses in the pretty porcelain teacup. Her brain had completely short-circuited at the smart words that had come out of his mouth. The embarrassing part was that she *had* thought that he looked good enough to eat. Literally mouth-watering, "get me a spoon" good enough to *eat*. Resting her head in her hand, she sighed heavily and continued eating her lunch. She was certain now she'd never hear from the cowboy again.

Juliana came awake with a start, still holding her fork in her hand. She'd dozed off, only for a few seconds, but she'd actually fallen asleep while *eating*. That was probably part of her problem. She was tired, and he set her on edge. She was usually good-humored and ready with a quick comeback, but she was off her game. Ash had flustered her, and she'd reacted poorly. She could just as easily have invited him back to the office to sit and visit while she ate. Yeah, she was a bitch all right.

She slipped her hand in her pocket when it vibrated, pulled out her cell phone and opened the new text message.

*I heard about this new disease. Maybe you heard of it, too?
Foot-in-mouth syndrome? It's terrible. I'm sorry.*

She sighed, chuckled, and began typing her reply.

*Well, at least it doesn't have as negative a connotation as
another condition I've heard of. Hellacious Bitch syndrome.
It's hard to be cured of and may have cost me a
friendship today. I'm sorry.*

Her phone vibrated again.

*I forgive you, if you forgive me.
I know you're tired. You need to rest.
See you Wednesday, pretty lady.*

Why did that endearment set her heart to fluttering? How could he forgive her so easily? Where was he going to be Wednesday?

Wednesday?

I'm helping the guys move some furniture and boxes for Teresa.

Oh.

* * * *

Juliana strapped the last box out of the bathroom closed with packing tape and placed it with several others in the hallway. Grabbing larger empty boxes, she went into Teresa's tidy bedroom and packed up her neat and organized closet, marveling at the simplicity with which Teresa kept her home. No one could accuse her of being a packrat like they could of Juliana.

While she was in the closet, she heard keys rattle in the front door and masculine voices as the men arrived to start moving the big items. One of them laughed as they continued their conversation.

Jack's voice travelled down the hallway to the bedroom. "Juliana's car is parked out front, so she must be in here somewhere."

Poking her head out of the closet, she called, "Hi! I'm in here." She was on her hands and knees in the closet when she felt a presence in the doorway behind her then heard a faint chuckle.

She stilled but didn't turn back to look at him. "Cowboy?"

“Yep. You can call me Ash.” Maybe he was being economical on words for fear of sticking his foot in his mouth again. “You look different in jeans.” *Or maybe not.*

Risking a peek back at him, from underneath a row of blouses, she caught him devouring her great, big derriere with his eyes. Heat tingled in her cheeks as she backed out of the closet, to face him head on. Ash offered his hand, which she reluctantly accepted, and helped her to rise. Her heart pounded in humiliation. A tiny voice told her to shut up, but she didn’t listen.

“What were you looking at?” she asked defensively, noting the big grin on his face, not appreciating him ridiculing her. Red flags went up in her brain, and she ignored them, too.

Ash shrugged. “I was just admiring the view, pretty lady. You should wear pants more often, although I like you in skirts, too. But I don’t care for those long, schoolmarmish skirts you wear to work. Where do you get those from? Prison-Wardens-R-Us?”

All she could do for a few seconds was sputter. Her mouth opened and closed several times, and she made noises, but nothing intelligent came out. Glaring up into his eyes, Juliana felt completely insulted. First he laughed at her big behind, and then he insulted the way she dressed. Finally her brain gathered some traction, and her tongue caught up with it.

“I did it again,” he began as his face fell.

“Yeah, *I’ll say*. I dress like a professional, for your information. Let me say, on behalf of any other woman unfortunate enough to pop up on your radar, we don’t like it when you make fun of how we’re built. Yes!” she grated, “I have a big ass, I *know*. Now shut up and leave me alone!”

The rest of the apartment had gone completely silent, except for a soft whistle and an occasional rustle of foil. Ash’s brows drew together. “That’s not what I meant at all, lady. I’ll leave you alone.” He held up his hands as he backed from the closet doorway. The way he said “lady” made her heart lurch a little. He didn’t say it

sarcastically. He spoke the word like, despite the ugly tone of her words and her current demeanor, that's what he *believed* she was.

After Ash vacated the room, she threw a silent hissy-fit in Teresa's closet, hands balled up into fists, jumping up and down, foot-stomping mad. It would be completely okay with her if she never had to turn her back on another living soul as long as she lived. She could not help the way her derriere was shaped. She took after her grandmother, who came from a long line of hour-glass shaped women, and Juliana was ever-aware of the big bazanga-butt she toted around twenty-four-seven.

Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? He just had to make comments like that. And what was with him insulting her work clothes? *I do not look like a prison warden. I dress stylishly, damn it!* Her skirts needed to be long because she sometimes had to climb on ladders in the stockroom. She couldn't have her stockroom employees looking up her skirts at her goodies, now could she? Jeans weren't professional, and she could never find slacks that fit her properly because of her small waist and huge, damned ass! She stomped again for good measure. *Damn it!*

For a time, the apartment was filled with the sounds of the men removing all the stacked boxes from the hallway.

"Hey, Juliana?" Jack said from the doorway a few minutes later as she lifted the hangers off of the rods. Her breathing had returned to normal, and she was beginning to feel terrible about biting Ash's head off. Why did she keep overreacting?

"Yeah, Jack?" She was unable to even look at him across the room.

"We brought you some breakfast tacos, if you're hungry. We're hauling the furniture out to the trucks." He entered the room and stopped beside the closet door and asked softly, "Are you okay?"

Her cheeks warmed as she looked at him and tried to smile. "Yeah. I'm just—you heard?" At his silent nod, she continued in a shamed whisper, "I'm just...a bitch."

Jack chuckled and said, “No, you’re not. Grace told me you looked exhausted, and she was right. Ash is a nice guy. I don’t think he meant to hurt your feelings. He’s outside with Joaquin right now. I got the impression he was sort of hoping to see you today.”

She looked up at him, surprised. “You didn’t ask for his help?” Oh crap, now she *really* felt like a bitch.

“Not specifically, no. When we pulled up, he asked if you were here already. He seemed happy when I pointed out your car in the parking lot.”

“Dang it. Thank you, Jack. I’m just going to stay back here and finish packing up her bedroom. I owe him an apology.”

“He’s not one to take offense easily,” Jack offered, making her feel worse, since she obviously *was*. “We’ll give you some space. Just keep putting the boxes in the hall and we’ll take it from there.”

“Okay. After I finish, I’ll pack the kitchen cabinets. This shouldn’t take long.”

They allowed her to work in peace, packing up Michael’s room and coming in only to take the furniture once she had the bed stripped and the end tables and dresser emptied. Joaquin and Angel took the first load and returned after unloading it and brought lunch with them. The tension had eased up by the time they stopped to eat around the kitchen countertop. Ethan and Adam bantered back and forth with Angel, Joaquin, and Ash while Jack and Juliana quietly looked on, laughing at their stories and jokes.

When lunch was over and they’d gone back to work, Ash leaned in to her as she emptied a kitchen cabinet. “I’m sorry I offended you. I really didn’t mean it that way. I realize, after thinking about it, that it probably didn’t come out sounding like a compliment but you’re—oh shit, never mind. I’m going to stop while I’m ahead. I think you’re very pretty, *every* bit of you.”

“I shouldn’t have taken offense, Ash. I saw you looking at my—well, *you know*, and I’m self-conscious about that...*part*, and I

shouldn't have jumped on you like that where others could hear. I don't know why I'm so oversensitive around you."

"It's your red hair," he said with a grin, ducking when she made to punch him as she struggled not to laugh, instead of being offended. "I'm going! I'm going! Ah! See? You're getting to know me now!" She liked the way his unusual, bluish-green eyes twinkled and his cheeks dimpled above his muttonchop sideburns when he smiled. Ash Peterson was a handsome devil.

"Get to work!" Gesturing with a finger to the front door, she said, "I need a ladder to get that clock down. Teresa told me she had it wired to that nail because she was afraid that it would fall when she closed the front door."

Ash tried to lift the clock off the wall where it hung above the front door, but he couldn't see behind it to disengage the wire. "I'll bring you the ladder when Ethan comes back from taking his load. He has one on his work truck," he said, tugging on a lock of her hair before making a hasty exit.

"Urgh!" she growled, unable to suppress a grin.

When Ash was a little boy, he was probably one of those who showed he liked a girl by being obnoxious to them, tying their pigtails together, and making fun of them. They would've been dire enemies, for sure. Now, she thought he was charming in an obnoxious, overgrown pit bull sort of way.

Being in proximity to Ash left Juliana feeling a little off kilter. He wasn't what she would call classically handsome. His features were weathered and tanned and, if she had to hazard a guess, was in his late thirties or early forties. The muttonchop sideburns and mustache he grew hid part of his face but added to his outdoorsy, masculine good looks. In contrast with his suntanned, callused exterior, his lips were full beneath the moustache and looked deliciously kissable.

A tingle had spread through her whole body, zeroing in on her clit when he'd leaned so close to her to apologize. She'd been able to feel his breath on the nape of her neck, above the neckline of her top.

Reliving the memory, she gasped, filled with a mix of outrage and giddiness. He'd been looking down her V-neck shirt front the whole time!

There was no suppressing the smile that spread across her face. She continued stacking everything on the kitchen counter as they came and went, loading boxes and furniture. Ash brought the ladder in for her and then left to deliver items Teresa was donating to the Goodwill store, while the other guys took a load of boxes to Angel and Joaquin's house.

Juliana finished packing the last of the glassware and was about to tape the box closed when she remembered the clock. She moved the seven-foot ladder into place and climbed up high with the needle-nose pliers Ash had provided her, to get at the flexible wire that secured the fragile, old clock on the nail. It took a lot of doing, but eventually she got a hold of one of the ends and started unwinding it.

* * * *

On his way back from the Goodwill drop-off location, Ash grinned to himself, remembering the sight he'd beheld earlier that morning. Before Juliana had gone on her tirade, which served to make the memory only sweeter, she'd been on her hands and knees, working in the closet, humming to herself. He'd come up on her silently to enjoy the view as long as he could but knew the moment she sensed his presence because she'd stopped humming.

She'd had that luscious, upside-down-heart-shaped tush that stuck straight out, her curvy upper thighs stretching and flexing as she reached to the back of the closet for something, and all he could envision was what she'd look like, ready and waiting for him to thrust his cock into her from behind. He'd gotten painfully hard imagining how her pussy would feel. Depriving him of the view, she'd stood up, her cheeks rosy and her sky-blue eyes shooting sparks. Then her

words had registered in his lust-soaked brain, but she'd had it all wrong. She'd thought he was making fun of her body.

His cock got hard again, thinking about telling her what he *truly* thought of her gorgeous ass as well as the rest of her, but he'd wait till they were completely alone before doing that.

He backed into the parking spot next to her pretty, new Camaro and climbed out of his truck, careful not to ding her white paint. Noticing the other guys' trucks were still gone, he turned the knob and pushed the front door open, eager to see if she was alone in the apartment so they could talk for a few minutes.

Ash heard a feminine yelp and a scrabbling, sliding sound. He saw her hand grappling fruitlessly for the top of the door as it swung open. A soft whimper was interrupted by the sound of shattering glass and a sickening thud.

Chapter Three

“Oh, fuck! Juliana!” Ash swung the door open, pushing the ladder out of the way, afraid of what he would see. He’d knocked her off of the ladder, causing her to land on the glass-topped coffee table that was supposed to go with the next load of furniture. She lay motionless in the midst of the now partially broken table and shattered glass top.

Ash squatted down to her. “Oh, shit! Darlin’—”

Groaning, Juliana looked up at him with pain-filled eyes, jerking her head back in agony and whimpering when she tried to sit up. She looked up at him helplessly.

Ash was torn, afraid to move her and cause her further pain but unable to leave her lying in the broken glass and splintered wood and hardware.

“Hold still, I’m going to lift you up. Did you hit your head or your neck?”

“No, it’s my shoulder and wrist. I—ow!” she yelped loudly as he lifted her carefully and placed her on a straight-back chair.

“Damn. What happened in here?” Ethan asked warily as he and Adam poked their heads into the doorframe. “Juliana, are you okay?”

Bits of glass fell to the floor as he carefully looked her over for injuries. She had a fairly serious-looking laceration between her shoulder blades. “Would one of you guys get a dish towel or something? Her back is bleeding. Darlin’, you should’ve locked the door while you were—”

Juliana grimaced in pain as she turned scathing blue eyes on him. “You should’ve knocked, you overgrown asshole! You knocked me

right off the ladder, barreling in the door like that! Why were you in such a hurry?" She cried out in pain when he lifted her wrist.

"I have no idea, none at all," he said as Ethan handed him the requested towel. He pressed the dish cloth to the bleeding laceration that was soaking the back of her torn shirt.

She arched away from him suddenly. "Ow! Fuck! You're making it worse. Give me the towel. Ow! My wrist! Get out of my way. I need ice."

Ash would've gotten it for her, but Juliana rose quickly from the chair before he could say anything. She faltered and stumbled then fell backward over the seat of the chair and the boxes stacked right behind it. Whimpering as she went down again, Juliana's head cracked against the kitchen countertop.

Ash moved first, afraid she was going to lose consciousness, but she shook her head and started griping at him again. Ethan found another dishcloth and filled it with ice from the freezer then handed it to her as Ash helped her back into the chair.

"I'll call nine-one-one," Angel said, appearing concerned as he and Joaquin entered the carnage in Teresa's living room.

Juliana held up her good hand, grimacing when Ash blotted again at the wound on her back with the dishtowel. "No, Angel. Don't do that. Can someone take me to the emergency room? I would drive myself but my wrist...I'm right handed. Oh, that's just fucking great! How am I supposed to work with a broken wrist? Son of a bitch! Ow-ow-ow! *Fuck, what are you doing to me!*" she screeched like a white-hot poker had touched her back, not seeing the rather large splinter of glass that Ash had just removed from the laceration. He was thankful it hadn't been lodged very deeply.

That had to have hurt like a son of a bitch. He looked up at Jack and grimaced, showing it to him. Jack's and Ethan's faces blanched when they saw how big it was. He dropped it in the trash can, and after making sure there were no more pieces still stuck in the wound, he pressed the towel carefully to her shoulder again.

"I'll take you to the emergency room." Ash felt one hundred percent responsible for her current pain.

"No! *Uh-uh!* I think you've done enough, *Mister Helper*. Jack can take me, or any of the others. There's no telling what else will happen to me with the luck I have around you. I'm liable to self-destruct! Ow, shit! Will you stop?"

"No, I will not! It's my fault you fell. I'll take you to the ER. Sit still so I can wrap this towel around your shoulder."

"*Don't* tell me what to do, you big, overgrown—Urgh! That hurts! Stop it!"

Adam moved the ladder out of the way so Ash could lift her up and carry her out to the truck.

"Oh, no you don't! I don't need to be carried! There's nothing wrong with my legs! Son of a bitch, that hurt! Ow! My wrist!" she howled as he carried her out to his truck. Angel opened the passenger side door then Ash lifted her into the seat, which was too high for her to climb into, even if she'd been able.

"Shush now. Let me buckle you up," he muttered as he tried to carefully ease her back in the seat.

"Did you just 'shush' me? This is all your damned fault! If you hadn't come barreling in there like some idiot *motherfucker*, I wouldn't be in this damned mess! You broke my wrist! You did this to me! I'm not going anywhere with you! Jack! Help me down! I'll drive my own damned self to the ER."

Ash retrieved the icepack from Ethan, who stood on the sidewalk with big eyes, listening as the lovely and professional Juliana Meyers cursed a blue streak that brought Ash's paternal lineage into question, made predictions on where she thought he'd end up after he died, and what he'd do once he got there. Ash rolled his eyes as Ethan handed over the icepack. If she was feeling up to that tirade, her injuries must not be life-threatening.

Jack walked up to the truck to stop her from unbuckling the seat belt and climbing down. "No. Now, sweetheart, listen. You need to sit

still and let Ash take you to the hospital. You're only making it hurt worse by getting so worked up."

Ash returned with the icepack. "Here you go, darlin'. Put this icepack—"

"Don't you *darlin'* me, you—" She growled as she leaned out of the truck, getting right in his face.

Ash laid his hand carefully between her collarbones, pressing her back into the seat, afraid to touch her anywhere for fear of causing more pain. He looked her dead in the eyes, and she glared right back with her icy-blues.

"Listen up, *darlin'*. I've had just about enough. Either you shut the fuck up now, or I'm going to duct tape that pretty little potty mouth of yours closed." He slammed the door in her face, walked around the front of the truck, and pulled open the driver's side door. "Do you kiss your mama and daddy with that mouth? Shame on you," he muttered then turned to the guys. "We'll be in the ER for a while, I'm sure. You go on to supper with the girls. I'll make sure she gets fed and cared for."

The guys nodded and waved. Actually, Adam and Jack saluted as he started the truck and pulled out. Ash was sure they could hear her yelling, even after the door was closed with the diesel engine running.

"If you think I'm going to let you talk to me like that and tell me what to do, you've got another think coming, mister!" The fiery redhead went on and on.

Holy shit, she's got a mouth on her. Ash suppressed a grin because he was sincerely worried about her injuries and didn't want her to be in pain. But by damn, he loved a feisty woman.

* * * *

Halfway through town, she finally ran down and became quiet, a little too quiet, he thought. Damn, but she could get going once she'd worked up a good head of steam. He glanced over at her to gauge her

condition. She was sitting forward, away from the seat, and it looked like the towel was soaked clean through. He reached out and held the cloth to the wound, which was bleeding again. Her hand was in her lap, and her fingers looked a little swollen. He happened to catch the glimmer of sunlight in a tear as it splashed onto her other hand. Her face was down, and her cheeks were red. More tears splashed, but she didn't make a sound.

He turned into the ER patient parking lot. She sat there quietly, cradling her wrist in the ice pack, while he came around to her door and opened it. He finally got a clear view of her face, which was red and blotchy, her cheeks bathed in tears and running mascara. She looked so injured and vulnerable. Broken. Then she made eye contact with him, and his heart lurched when he saw the shame in her eyes.

"Aww, darlin'. It'll be all right."

In a shaky voice, she whispered, "Ash, I'm—"

One of the guys must have called ahead because an orderly and a nurse came running to their parking space. The moment to say anything further was lost as she was helped into a wheelchair. Never arguing or insisting that she could walk, Juliana allowed them to help her, but she held onto his hand as they wheeled her in, looking back at him as if she were afraid he might leave.

They brought her into the trauma room and ordered Ash out to the waiting room to register her. He gave what information he could, deferring most of it to her to fill in the blanks. When they asked what his relationship was to the patient, he lied and told the receptionist that he was her boyfriend.

* * * *

Ash pushed Juliana's wheelchair out to the truck later that evening and lifted her onto the passenger seat. She was still quiet, and it was beginning to worry him.

The doctor had given her something for the pain and had told her to follow up with Dr. Guthrie about her wrist and the bump on her head. He'd cautioned her to not be left alone overnight because of the blow to her head. The medication she'd been given made her groggy, and Ash hadn't minded sitting with her while she'd dozed.

Grace must've called Evelyn and given her the rundown and Ash's phone number because Evelyn called him directly. She asked him to let Juliana know that she should rest and not worry about the store, that she and Leah would see to it for her the following day. Juliana had accepted the message with a mute nod.

Ash followed her directions to her house in one of the older, stately neighborhoods in town. Crape myrtles lined the sidewalk in front of her home, and his dually pickup dominated her narrow, concrete driveway as he pulled in and turned off the diesel engine. She noticed her Camaro parked in front of the garage door and realized someone must've brought it home for her.

Juliana handed him her house key, and he unlocked the door then returned and lifted her out of the truck, holding her carefully. She felt tense and frail in his arms, not at all like the lively spitfire he'd handled earlier. Truth be told, he preferred the spitfire.

Resting her head against his shoulder, Juliana allowed him to carry her into the house. He headed toward the back of the house down the hallway that led to her bedroom. A lamp on one side of the king-size bed dimly illuminated the room. She tensed up as he lowered her to the bed.

"Are you hungry?" he asked as he squatted down. Her eyes were downcast, and she looked completely wiped out. He wondered how many hours of sleep she got on a regular basis.

"No, my stomach feels queasy from the medication the doctor gave me. I think it wouldn't be a good idea to eat and then lay down," she murmured, holding her hand to her stomach. "Um, Ash?" She started to speak and then hesitated. She put her good hand to her forehead, as though she felt overwhelmed.

“What, darlin’?” he asked quietly, stroking the backs of her calves as he knelt there.

“I think I’m going to need some help tonight.”

“Sure, that’s why I came in. Whatever you need, I’ll help you with.”

“I—um. I mean I need...shoot. I need help changing...into my nightgown. I can’t believe this is happening. I should’ve asked Grace or Teresa to come help me so I wouldn’t have to embarrass you like this. The cast is on my right hand, and I have stitches on my left middle finger from cutting it on the metal door. I can’t get my boots off, or unbutton my jeans, or even take off my bra. I need help, but...I’m sorry.” She burst into tears, sobbing like her heart was breaking, her head bowing on her shoulders. He reached for her but wound up putting his hands on her knees, feeling like it was the only safe place he could touch her and not chance hurting her.

He leaned toward her on one knee, and she laid her cheek on his shoulder and wept as her body grew more and more tense. Ash became worried she’d tear her stitches, her sobs broke forth from her with such force.

“Darlin’, you’re going to hurt yourself crying so hard. Please, it’s breaking my heart that you’re hurting so much. If you need my help changing, I don’t mind that. I’ll be a perfect gentleman, I promise. Tell me what you need.”

“I need you to forgive me, Ash, for being such a bitch earlier. I should have my mouth washed out with soap. I feel so ashamed. I completely lost it with you, yelling at you like that in front of the other men, *again*. I can’t believe I talked to you like that. I promise it’ll never happen again.”

“All cussed out?”

He saw her attempt to smile. “Yeah, I’m all cussed out. My mother would be appalled at my mouth.”

“You were in pain and a little pissed off. We were both upset. Can you forgive me for causing the accident? It was my fault.”

“Of course. It was an accident. I should’ve locked the door.”

“Then I can forgive you, too. Was that what you were crying about? That was one hell of a dam bursting inside you over just a little cussing.”

Juliana shrugged, wincing slightly at the movement. “I—I don’t know. It—I think it was everything, and it *wasn’t* a little cussing.” She wiped her eyes with her good hand. “I think it was the breakup with Lawrence and the Christmas rush and the *after*-Christmas rush and work and...us...and everything.” She laid her cheek against his shoulder again as she huffed and snuffled.

“Us? Really?” That brightened his day a little bit, right there.

“Well, I mean, I like—I’m interested in you, but...we seem to have the worst luck. I’ve picked a fight with you every time we’ve shared a conversation. I’m not an argumentative, brawling type of person. It sets me on edge to be around people who are like that. But...”

“You’re attracted to me?” He stroked her back, careful to avoid the dressing between her shoulder blades.

Sitting up, she nodded and reached for the box of tissue on the nightstand. He handed it to her, and she began blotting her eyes.

“Okay,” he said and then was quiet for a few seconds. “Listen, let’s get you changed into something more comfortable. I’ll help you lie down, and then we can talk about it.”

He kept her talking while he helped her undress, to distract them both. The diversion didn’t work so well as more and more of her fragrant, satiny flesh was revealed. He was used to undressing a woman for only one purpose, and lusting after her, when she was still in pain, felt wrong.

She groaned when she lifted her arms slightly to slip her shirt off. Studiously ignoring the lush cleavage cupped in her sexy bra, he slipped her boots and socks off. He had her stand as his fingers slid into the waistband of her jeans to unbutton and unzip the fly. He slid the jeans down her hips and groaned quietly when he realized she was

wearing a pink lace thong. One of his fingers had accidentally hung in the waistband at her hip and drew it down with the jeans. His overeager, obnoxious cock roared to life, and he hesitated, in agony.

“On or off?” he asked simply, not able to be more specific, without diving in, injured or not.

“I need to...um, off, please. I need to use the restroom. It will pull my stitches if I bend right now.”

Off.

Fuck.

The thong was coming off then. He slid it down her long, silky legs, along with her blue jeans, as she leaned against him and slipped her feet from them, one at a time. She was inches from his lips and completely off-limits. He kept his eyes on her feet and her dainty, red toenails.

Shit, shit, shit.

Chapter Four

He should have thought this out better. She was standing in front of him in only her bra, which he was willing to bet was also pink lace to match her thong.

They were both frozen as if they were having the same “oh shit” realization. “My...gown is hanging on the hook behind my bathroom door.”

He stood with his eyes hooded, doing his best to not look at what he couldn't have, at least not yet. His cock totally, vehemently disagreed. Greedy bastard.

He retrieved a silky little wisp of nothing that was the gown she asked for, along with a fleece robe that hung on the same hook beneath it. Coverage was a good thing right now.

He wanted to be a gentleman and allow her some privacy, but he could not get his eyes to cooperate as he returned from the bathroom. He was not much of a gentleman in those seconds as he took her in.

Her sumptuous form was backlit by the lamp, so he could make out every inch of her silhouette, from the graceful curve of her spine to the delectable swell of her ass and then further to her long, shapely thighs.

Juliana turned partially on the bed as she heard him re-enter the room, and he could clearly see the generous swell of her breast, her peaked nipple visible through the sheer, pink lace of her bra. His eyes drank it all in, down the soft curve of her tummy to the top of her thighs, where a hint of the cinnamon-hued curls that covered her mons were barely visible. She turned away, and he saw the dressing

on her shoulder blade and her cast as she reached back to shield her derriere from his view.

With renewed purpose, he strode to her, ready to take the bull by the horns. He knelt in front of her, looking into her eyes the whole time, and reached around to the clasp of her bra. After releasing it, he smiled up into her eyes, hidden in shadow so he couldn't read them, and slid the straps from her silky shoulders, refusing to give in to the temptation to gaze on what he knew were perfect breasts. He held up the nightgown and helped her slip her arms into it then drew it carefully over her head and smoothed it into place.

"Thank you, Ash."

"You're welcome. Come on, brush your teeth and get yourself ready for bed. I'll get you a glass of water. I'll bet you're thirsty, aren't you?"

"Yes...I am. Thank you," she murmured as he helped her to the bathroom.

Ash found her kitchen and came back to the bedroom with a glass of water. After placing it on her night stand, he pulled her covers back and waited for her to return from the bathroom.

Helping her remove the robe, Ash did his best not to notice the tight nipples that peaked the silken fabric of her nightgown, or the fact that sheer lace slashed across both hips and the torso of the gown. *This is what she sleeps in at night? Damn!*

He sat down on the bed with her and handed her the glass of water. After draining it, she laid back carefully, flinching as she tried to get comfortable. She wound up turning on her side so that she faced him, and he helped her prop her wrist up on a pillow. When she was finally settled, he brushed a fingertip over her cheekbone.

"When was the last time you took a vacation or a day off?"

After a long pause, she replied, "I can't remember. The store has sort of become my life."

"I thought as much. How many hours are you working per week?" He didn't want her to feel cornered, but he felt compelled to ask.

“Long hours, Ash. I work retail management. I’m there when we open and when we close.”

“How many? Give me an estimate.”

She frowned and sighed. “I’m usually there about eighty hours a week. I’ve gotten used to it. My friends always know where to find me, and many of my employees are like family to me.”

He had a feeling she was making the excuse to herself as much as she was to him. He didn’t speak for fear of coming across as judgmental. Eighty hours a week explained a lot. Evelyn had mentioned she was overtired and oversensitive, and now he could see why.

“Technically, I was off today. And I take off a couple of hours on Sunday to go to church and have lunch with friends. I still have time here and there for things like that during the week.”

“Here and there? You worked hard all day today, until you got hurt, so today cannot be counted as a day off.”

“I know. I’ll take the day off tomorrow...or at least the morning.”

“You have a second in command, don’t you?”

“Yeah, Leah Woodworth.”

“Good. Evelyn said she and Leah would cover for you tomorrow. You should take off the whole day. How are you sleeping at night?”

“I sleep fine, but I tend to be a night owl.”

“Meaning what? What’s your bedtime?”

“After I’ve read for a while, usually around midnight, sometimes later. It takes me a while to wind down.”

He stroked her cheekbone with his fingertips. “You’re worn out, aren’t you, darlin’?”

She nodded in agreement.

“No wonder you’re out of sorts. You’re dead on your feet. It’s eleven o’clock right now. I’ll let Angel know I’m staying here tonight to watch over you and help you in the morning. I’ll fix you breakfast, too.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she murmured, rubbing her cheek against his palm. He could tell she was already drifting into slumber.

“It’ll ease my mind. Besides, the doctor said you were not to be left alone because you’d hit your head so hard.”

“Marshmallow,” she whispered.

“What?”

She smiled sleepily. “You look like a big, tough cowboy on the outside, but you’re soft as a marshmallow on the inside, aren’t you?”

He felt a small hitch in his throat at the vulnerable tone she used. “Yeah, you nailed me.”

She pressed her lips to his palm and drifted away, saying nothing further. He forced himself to rise from her cozy, comfortable bed and move to the overstuffed chair in the corner nearby. At least it had an ottoman so he could prop his feet up. He slipped his boots off and got comfortable.

* * * *

Juliana woke during the night, disoriented and groggy. Her eyes wouldn’t cooperate at first and felt like they were lined with sandpaper. She reached up to rub them and bopped herself in the forehead with her cast. Then she remembered what had happened. She attempted the same maneuver with the other hand and groaned when her stitched and wrapped finger started throbbing. Bad move. She used her left elbow to prop herself up, thinking to get some Tylenol from her bathroom but rethought that action when it pulled on her stitches. She lay back down with a groan, and then she noticed Ash as he sat up and came to her, concern in his eyes. He looked wide awake.

“What’s the matter, darlin’? What do you need?”

“Ash? You stayed?”

He grinned. "Yeah, you were pretty out of it when you fell asleep. The doctor doesn't want you to be alone tonight." He checked his watch. "It's about three o'clock. Are you in pain?"

"Yes. I can't seem to get up without making something hurt."

"Stay right there and I'll get it for you. How is your stomach?"

"My stomach feels fine now. The pain reliever is in the medicine cabinet in my bathroom."

Ash went to the bathroom, got what she needed, and refilled her water glass then brought them back to her. He helped her to sit up in the bed, and she took the pills and then handed the glass back to him after draining it.

"You didn't eat any supper last night. Do you want some crackers or a piece of toast?" he asked, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"No, I think I'd better wait until the morning, but I could use an ice pack. My finger is throbbing like crazy. I must have put pressure on it in my sleep."

"I'll be right back."

He fixed her an ice pack and wrapped it around her hand with a dish towel, helping her to lie down and position herself on her other side, with both hands propped up.

"It was nice of you to stay with me, Ash. You must be exhausted."

"Actually, your chair is fairly comfortable. Why don't you go back to sleep now. I'll be right here if you need anything."

Juliana closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep but gradually came fully awake. She'd knocked her sleep schedule off-kilter by dozing throughout the evening and then falling asleep so early, or at least, early for her. She lay quietly listening to Ash and heard him sigh and shift in the chair. A few minutes later, he shifted again.

"Ash?"

"Yeah, darlin'?" His faintly accented voice was a balm to her senses in the quiet of the room.

"I can't sleep. You can't get comfortable. Will you come lay down with me?" Yeah, because *that* would help her fall asleep. This

would no doubt be an exercise in self-torture, but she knew he was not comfortable, either. If he was willing to stay to watch over her, the least she could do was make him comfortable. She posed it as a direct request, knowing he wouldn't come to bed if she asked him if he'd like to.

"You sure, darlin'? I'm afraid I'd wind up hurting your stitches or banging on your wrist."

"I'll be okay. You won't wobble me on this mattress. Just be careful when you scooch in."

"Which side?"

"Behind me. There's more space on that side of the bed."

"You sure?" he asked, sounding unsure.

"Yes, Ash. I'd feel better if you were lying down, comfortable, and I...I'd like it if you came closer. I promise I'll behave," she said with a faint chuckle.

He sounded like he was smiling when he said in the dark, "Well, if you're sure my virtue is safe."

"Very safe, Ash," she whispered, softly adding, "For now, anyway."

She felt the bed dip slightly, and then a shiver went up her spine as his lips brushed her ear when he replied, "I heard that," before she felt his lips press against her throat, his fingers brushing her hair away from her neck.

Smiling into the darkness, she listened to him settle directly behind her, not pressing against her but up nice and close. She closed her eyes and couldn't help the shuddering sigh of pleasure that slipped from her when his fingertips slid up her cheekbone then over her temple, stroking in a repetitive pattern down her throat, to the curve of her shoulder, then back up again.

"That is the most soothing thing I've felt, in...I have no idea how long," she whispered, sighing in pleasure at his light, tickling touch.

"Try to relax and get some more sleep. I'll be right here," he murmured, continuing to stroke her.

“Ash?”

“What, darlin’?” She shivered slightly at the feel of his breath on her cheek, her body very much aware of his proximity.

“I’m not usually such a difficult person to be around.”

“I know, darlin’. I never thought that.”

Scoffing lightly, she said, “After today, even I would think I was one crazy, mouthy bitch.”

“Today you were not yourself, and anyone can tell you’re tired out. I don’t think you’re like that at all.”

“You haven’t seen me at my best, not even once.”

“We haven’t known each other that long. It would be harsh for me to judge what kind of person you are based on the little time we’ve spent together.”

He was being awfully generous. If she’d met someone as cantankerous as she’d been, she’d have written them off without another thought.

“I just wanted you to know, I’m not usually like that, so oversensitive. I don’t know why I’ve been like that.”

“I’ll bet you’d feel better if you had a little rest, and some time off.”

“It’s easier said than done.”

“I know. It’s hard when you have so much responsibility. But people will cut you slack when they know you need it. Darlin’, when you were in the closet at Teresa’s house and you got upset, did you think I was making fun of how you’re shaped?”

“I’ve always been self-conscious of certain...physical attributes.”

“You mean your derriere?”

She sighed and nodded as he continued his hypnotic stroking, drawing the honest answer from her.

“Why?”

“Growing up, I got teased for it. I developed early, and I’ve always been...curvy, unlike most of the women in my family who are willowy. My older brother teased me mercilessly when I started

developing. He was hateful to me, telling me I had a fat ass, even kicking me or swatting me there several times. Turning my back to anybody, like how I was with you in the closet, is very uncomfortable for me.”

Juliana felt his lips in her hair, and then he murmured, “I’m sorry your brother was mean to you, darlin’. All the women in my family are shapely, too. My dad would’ve kicked my ass if I’d ever teased one of them for it. He and all my uncles were proud to have curvy, beautiful women in our family. My grandma, my mom, sisters, and my aunts are all real lookers.”

“Really?” She wondered what it would be like to be part of a family that didn’t judge you by your appearance. She never felt like she measured up with any of the women in her family and only a few of the men.

“As for what I personally think about your attributes? I think your ass is just about the *prettiest* thing I’ve ever seen, except for maybe all the beauty I tried *not* to see tonight while I helped you change clothes. My only regret was that I couldn’t enjoy the experience because you were in pain. I think you’re a knockout, and anyone who can’t see that must be the *dumbest* ass in captivity.”

She chuckled at the disgruntled snort that punctuated his statement. “Cowboy, you sure do have a way with words.”

“I call ’em like I see ’em, darlin’.” He stroked her hair, drawing his fingers through it and smoothing it back from her forehead and temple.

“That feels so good.” Her heart ratcheted up a notch when she felt his full lips and the tickle of his moustache on the nape of her neck as he stroked her hair from her neckline. She tried not to fidget as an aching rush of desire flooded her core, wishing his fingers were stroking her pussy like that right now. She felt awash in need for him.

“Your hair feels like silk under my fingers. You’re beautiful, and I hope you never doubt it again.”

“Ash, you keep this up and I’ll be putty in your hands. Hell, I already am,” she whispered shakily, choosing to be honest about how he affected her.

He brushed his lips against her jawbone. “I won’t take advantage of an injured woman, and you need your rest. If it helps, I’ll keep doing this, but if it’s keeping you awake—”

“Oh, don’t stop. I love it.”

“My hands aren’t too rough?”

“They feel just right. And, Ash, thanks. You’re good for a girl’s ego.”

“I aim to please. You rest and I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“What about the ranch? I know you have a lot of responsibility.”

“Joaquin and Angel are going to cover for me in the morning like they did this evening. Sometimes you have to take a little time for the important things, and you’ve become important to me.”

“You’re extremely forgiving,” she said humbly.

“I’m a good judge of character.”

Chapter Five

No, Ash couldn't make love to her like his cock was screaming for him to. He couldn't touch her tonight the way his fingers itched to. He couldn't put his mouth on all the places he'd fantasized about kissing. His body ached with the need to be inside her. His cock hadn't stopped throbbing since he'd climbed into her bed. His balls were in insistent agony at her close proximity. Her scent and her body heat permeated the sheets and comforter around her, warming him as well.

But he could lay here with her and it was enough—just to be close to her. This was not how their first night together should've been, but he was proving to himself and maybe to her that he was a man of worth, like his father and his brothers, that he would be there for her and take care of her.

In the dark of the night, he could be honest with himself and accept that he was falling in love with her. Her auburn-red hair had drawn his eyes the moment she'd walked into the room at the ranch Christmas party. When he'd realized they were friends, he'd quietly asked Grace if she'd mind introducing him to her.

He smiled, remembering the twinkle in Grace's knowing eyes when she'd invited him over to make the introduction. Juliana had turned her clear, sky-blue eyes his way, appearing completely undeterred by his height and size. He'd lost his heart to her right then. She'd smiled at him and drawn him into a conversation, asking him about himself and then actually listening when he answered her questions.

She'd stepped outside when the room had gotten crowded, and he'd taken advantage of the opportunity. In the course of their conversation, she'd mentioned her now former boyfriend and his inexcusable absence on Christmas Day. It was then that he'd stuck his foot in his mouth the first time. He was just as responsible for setting Juliana off as she was for losing her temper.

Resting his head in his right hand, Ash continued to stroke her hair and her cheek, even though he could tell she was sound asleep. He was greedy, and if this was all he could do tonight, he would get his fill of touching her, even if it was in this innocent way.

He'd also been stroking her upper arm, and as his fingers drifted, she shivered lightly and murmured in her sleep, snuggling back toward him.

Ash wanted to be responsible for more than just a murmur. He wanted to hear her throaty moans when he suckled her nipples. He wanted to hear her pant in ecstasy as he stroked into the silky heat between her thighs and to be personally responsible for her screams as she came so hard they both saw stars. He wanted everything she had to give and to give her what she needed from him. He wasn't sure how they were going to fit any of that in if she was working eighty hours each week.

His body's natural alarm clock woke him early at five o'clock. It was dark in the room, and he took stock of his position before moving. He didn't want to startle her or cause her any jarring pain when he moved.

She must've gotten chilled as she slept because she'd gravitated backward and was now spooned against him with her head resting on his bicep. His body was curled around hers, and his other hand rested comfortably on her abdomen.

Damn, he hated to move.

Ash wanted to wake up in this position with her every morning. The only thing that would be better would be waking up with them both naked. He looked down at her, listening to her breathe.

The streetlight outside cast a dim glow through her mini-blinds so that he could make out the swell of her breasts, barely covered by the plunging neckline of her gown. That luscious, seductive curve was almost more temptation than he could manage. He was barely successful in stifling a groan when she moved in her sleep and pressed her ass against him. Luckily, she was too deeply asleep to be aware of the thickened cock she was rubbing against.

Knowing he had to get up, unable to stand more innocent torture, he drew the comforter over her shoulder and carefully slipped out and slid the other pillow behind her. Stepping out of her bedroom, he closed the door so that he wouldn't disturb her and then headed for the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

* * * *

Juliana woke several hours later to the sound of her shower running and the scent of bacon and coffee. The sun was high in the sky, and she gasped in surprise when she saw that she had slept until nine o'clock in the morning. It was always her habit to rise at six-thirty and be at the store by eight o'clock, even though they didn't open until ten. Her day had to begin earlier so that she had time for paperwork and planning and could then spend at least part of her day on the sales floor, directing operations. It made for a long day, but it kept everything running efficiently. This morning, it made her tired to think of spending an entire day at the store like that. It seemed almost sad.

The water in her bathroom shut off as she rolled onto her back, testing her pain level. She was due for some more Tylenol soon. She smiled when the image of Ash in her bathroom, naked, drying off with her bath towel came to mind. She wondered obscenely if he was the type to walk around after his shower with his hips wrapped in a towel, or if he went naked until he got dressed. If she'd been feeling a bit more chipper this morning, she might go and investigate for

herself, but she was moving way too slow, and he was dressed and out of the bathroom before she was even sitting fully upright in the bed.

Ash's hair was damp but neatly groomed, and he looked like he'd gotten a little rest after he'd come to bed with her. She'd slept surprisingly well, remembering falling asleep to the feel of his gentle hand stroking her arm. He smiled when he saw that she was awake and came to sit on the side of the bed closest to her. He peeked under the dressing between her shoulder blades.

"How do you feel this morning?"

"A little better. I can't believe I slept so late. How does my back look?"

"Well, the stitches look like they're holding up, but you bled some during the night. The bandage leaked a little. You didn't get any blood on your gown, though."

"Good, I love this gown," she replied, relieved but a tad self-conscious in it in front of him.

"Me, too," he murmured, his eyes twinkling as he smiled.

"Sorry, I probably should have chosen a more modest gown last night, for your sake."

"Don't be sorry, darlin'. I think you look beautiful in satin and lace, and if you like it, you shouldn't have chosen any differently."

Her cheeks warmed as he replaced the dressing. "Thank you, Ash. Do you think you could help me with a new bandage after I take a shower?"

"Sure, darlin'. I made bacon and eggs, and there's coffee, too."

"It was sweet of you to cook breakfast. Most of the time I pick up a taco on the way to work or eat cereal."

"Come eat while it's still warm, and then I'll take the dressing off and help you wrap your cast for your shower."

Juliana groaned, looked up at him, and said, "Shoot. This is going to be interesting. How am I supposed to—"

Ash smiled good-naturedly. “How in the world are you going to shower? Stitches on one hand, cast on the other, stitches on your back.” She noted the lack of worry on his face.

Juliana sighed as she sat down at the table, watching Ash fix her a plate and put a piece of bread in her toaster. She was even clumsy trying to fix her coffee the way she liked it after he poured it for her.

Solution oriented, she said, “I’ll unwrap my bandaged finger. It’ll be okay. In a few days, those stitches come out. If you can help me a little this morning, then I’ll call Grace or Teresa and ask them to help me tomorrow and the next day. It won’t be so bad.”

When she was ready to take her shower, he closed his eyes like a true gentleman and helped her out of her gown then removed the dressing and waited while she wrapped herself in a bath sheet. He wrapped her cast so it wouldn’t get wet in the shower. She got through her shower without too much difficulty—until it was time to wash her hair. Standing there with the water running, Juliana examined her options. There were none.

“Ash?”

“Yeah, darlin’?” he called, opening the bathroom door a crack.

“I need to wash my hair. I’ve gotten it wet, but I’m...having difficulty. I hate to ask. I know it’s not fair to you, but I need your help.”

“By the time you’re healed, we’re going to be very intimately acquainted, aren’t we?”

Much more intimately acquainted if her throbbing pussy had its way in the matter. “I think so, yes. Do you mind?”

Juliana heard a faint chuckle. “Do I mind? Hmmm, let me think. Do I mind seeing a beautiful woman I’m interested in naked? What do you think, silly?”

“But the circumstances, it can’t be easy.”

“What’s another cold shower? All right, I’m coming in. Are you expecting me to close my eyes?”

“Well, the shower curtain will help. No, you don’t have to close your eyes, just no ogling my goodies.” She scoffed, wondering if that statement sounded as asinine to him as it did to her.

“You know, this is not how I envisioned seeing you naked the first time.”

“Ash, the first time was last night.”

“Yeah, but the lights were down low, and I was trying to not look. I can’t help it this morning if I’m going to wash your hair for you.” He grinned at her as she peeked out from behind the yellow shower curtain.

“How did you envision the first time you saw me naked?”

Oh, sure, let’s just go for full-on torture.

“Well, certainly under more romantic circumstances, and the possibility of me getting naked with you also came up in my fantasies.”

Ooh, fantasies! Juliana giggled as she handed him the shampoo. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.” She turned and held the shower curtain around her hips while he lathered her hair, allowed her to rinse, and then repeated the process with her.

“I’m honored that you trust me like this, darlin’.”

She smiled back at him and said, “I really do, you know.”

“How does this feel?” he asked, gently brushing her injured shoulder blade with his fingertip.

“It stung like crazy when the warm water first touched it, but it feels better now.”

“You’ll need to let it dry completely before we can dress it. It might’ve been a good idea to not get it wet until later today.”

“I forgot to check the doctor’s instructions. I wanted a shower so bad.”

“We’ll make sure it’s dry before we cover it. Okay, you’re all done. Need anything else washed?” he asked, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

“Maybe on another occasion, Ash. Thank you.”

“Want more coffee?”

“I’d love it. Milk and two sugars.”

“You got it, darlin’.”

He helped her dress and held the blow-dryer for her while she dried her hair. Getting ready took significantly longer than she expected, even with his help. Even though she’d assured him she could make it to work on her own, he’d insisted on driving her and picking her up. He drove her to the store and helped her from his truck, and then he told her he’d be back in a little while with her lunch. She was mildly surprised, having expected him to drop her off and then pick her up that night after he was done.

“No, darlin’. I have to run home and change clothes, and then I’ll pick you up some lunch and bring it back to you. You check in around here and do anything that needs doing. Evelyn is staying until five, and Leah is closing the store at the usual time. Your store runs like a well-oiled machine. I’ll be picking you up at four o’clock.”

“Four o’clock? But—”

“You can come back to the ranch with me, or I can take you back to your place for supper, and then you can get another good night’s rest. I can stay with you again if you like, but one way or the other, Evelyn and Leah are giving you the boot at four o’clock.”

“Uh-oh. I have prescriptions I need to fill.”

“I’ll drop them off for you and pick them up later. Do you need something for pain right now?” She was at a loss at the prospect of him caring for her when she was so used to taking care of herself.

“No, I have acetaminophen in my desk drawer.”

“Good, you make sure and take some. I hate to see you hurting. I’ll see you with lunch in a bit. Sandwiches okay?”

“Um, yeah,” she replied, feeling heat flood her face when he leaned down and kissed her cheek. He was even coming back to eat with her? Wow.

“See you in a little while. Don’t climb any ladders,” he called, looking back at her and giving her a cheeky grin as he walked away.

Of course, she did the mature thing and stuck her tongue out at him. He chuckled and said, "Shouldn't do that unless you're willing to share."

He returned at lunchtime in different clothes and freshly shaved with her prescriptions, a toasted ham and turkey sandwich made the way she liked it, and a large sweet tea. She was impressed.

"How are you feeling?"

"Groggy and a little achy," she replied, thanking him as he opened the antibiotic and gave her a dose.

She looked at him wistfully, thinking that things had definitely changed between them since yesterday. She felt relaxed around him now.

"What is it, darlin'?"

I wish I could climb up in your lap and let you deal with the world for a little while, big cowboy.

She closed her eyes and shrugged. "I feel wrung out and tired. Maybe lunch will perk me up a bit. I appreciate everything you've done for me. I don't know how to thank you."

"Let me give it some thought, and I'll get back to you on that after you're feeling better," he said with a mischievous smile. "I may have to extract payment from your flesh."

She did the appropriate thing *for once* and laughed, then dug into her lunch.

* * * *

Later that afternoon, Ash found her in the stockroom, directing traffic and giving instructions. Her crew stood around her while she assigned their tasks as he stood back and listened quietly.

He could tell her bandaged finger was throbbing again because she had it elevated at her shoulder, and he worried that her back was hurting also because she flinched when she pointed up at the tall racks above her.

Leah and Evelyn nodded, and the others went to their tasks. Evelyn looked up and saw him standing at the door and smiled. Looping her wrist through Juliana's elbow, she escorted her over to Ash.

"Juliana was just giving us final instructions for the evening, Ash. She's ready to go."

Juliana rolled her eyes at Ash and said, "They're giving me the 'bum's rush.'"

Evelyn patted Ash's forearm and said, "She's had a busy day and needs to unwind now. Don't worry about the store, Juliana. We'll make sure everyone stays on task. This will be excellent experience for Leah. You don't have a thing to worry about. Now you two have a wonderful evening, and Juliana, go to bed early and get caught up on your sleep."

"Thank you, Miss Evelyn," Ash said, tipping his hat to her. He carefully took Juliana's hand, mindful of her stitches. He liked the way her delicate hand felt in his.

"I'll get my purse and a couple of other things," she said as she stepped toward the rear of the store.

"No work. You won't have time for it," he said, grinning when she frowned. Busted. "You're under orders to not bring any work home, either."

"Was that 'Mizz Evelyn's' idea, too?"

"Yup," he said with a chuckle. Miss Evelyn had already ratted her out. "Whatever it takes."

She sighed and then grimaced, gingerly reaching back to her shoulder.

"Does it hurt?" he asked sympathetically.

"Yeah, I'm ready for another pain reliever. It twinges sharply every so often. I'll go take one and be right out."

* * * *

Juliana retrieved her purse and her lightweight jacket from the hook behind her office door. She stopped at the fountain and took a pain pill then went in search of him.

The sound of giggling was her first indicator of his approximate location. Left unattended, he was like a magnet to steel. She didn't see him until she turned the corner as the giggling got louder. Sure enough, five designer-denim-clad, silver-belt-buckle-wearing, low-cut top, cowboy hat and boot-wearing blonde-haired bimbos were all over him like a duck on a June bug.

Chapter Six

Slowly advancing, Juliana eyed how the girls were dressed. Only one of them had an indecently low-cut top. The others were attired nicely, just all-out Western. That was something Ash wouldn't see her in. She owned two pairs of jeans but no other Western wear, besides an old pair of cowboy boots. Most of what she owned was clothes for work, and Western wear didn't fit into the mix. Not that she was opposed to owning any, it just wasn't her style.

She looked at him then, the quintessential cowboy, from his hat to his boots. It was a small wonder that the young women had zeroed in on him. But what did he see in her? A city girl through and through. Okay, so maybe not big city like Dallas or San Antonio, but she certainly was no cowgirl. When he turned those piercing, turquoise-blue eyes on her, what did he see?

She noticed he was talking to the group of girls, his eyes twinkling, a big grin on his face. They giggled and laughed, having eyes only for him as he scanned the store. He made eye contact with her, and she saw a new light come into his eyes, and it made her insides quiver a little. He grinned down at the girls and pointed at her, said something that made them sigh and giggle, then he nodded at them and walked away.

She ignored the gaggle of giggling buckle bunnies, none of whom could have been over eighteen as they openly watched him walk away, ogling his assets. Shoot, if the young ones were like this in town, she wondered what it would be like if he was to participate in one of the area rodeos.

"I leave you alone for one minute, and the women are swarming over you like ticks on a hound," she said with a chuckle as he carefully gathered her hand in his.

"Oh, they were harmless enough. They're all friends who are competing in the Miss Tarkett County Fair Queen competition. They're out looking for sponsors for the contest. They figured I was a rancher."

"Oh, uh-huh?" she quipped, "And they wanted you to 'sponsor' one of them?" She giggled good-naturedly. "Looked like two or three of them wanted to 'sponsor' *you*."

"Now, now, Miss Juliana, I only have eyes for a certain lovely redhead. I told them they should go see Grace over at Harper's about getting the ranch to sponsor one of them."

"That's actually a great idea."

"Part of the money they raise goes to charity."

"That was some sincere fundraising work they were doing just now, ogling your fine cowboy tush."

Ash smiled and laughed. "Were they checking out my ass?"

Juliana guffawed. "Of course they were. You couldn't hear them sighing and giggling as you walked away? If any of them had spoons, they'd be eating you right now."

He drew her closer to him and whispered, "Do *you* think I have a fine cowboy tush?" with a bit of a growl added in, which turned her insides to mush.

"Um—absolutely," she replied, going for straight honesty, feeling her cheeks blush all the way to her red roots.

"Really?" He sounded genuinely surprised. He even blushed a little above his muttonchops.

"Yep, totally bitable." She giggled when he growled again as he held the side door open for her. "What were you saying to those girls when you pointed to me?"

"Oh, that? I was telling them...that I was here to pick up my pretty lady friend," he said after a little hesitation.

“Oh?” He opened the door of the truck and helped her onto the seat. After he climbed in, he turned to her.

“Bitable?”

She snickered. “Oh, yeah. It’s very nice.”

“Ouch,” he said as he started the truck.

“Mmmm, yummy.”

“Not to change the, uh—subject. But I was hoping to have supper with you tonight, if you have the energy, that is. Would you like to go back to your house and see about that bandage on your back first?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind, Ash. I’ve been worried about it getting infected since I got it wet this morning.”

They returned to her house, and after removing her top and wrapping up in a towel, Juliana allowed him to peel back the dressing and take a look.

“Darlin’, it looks fine, not inflamed or puffy around the stitches like it would be if it was getting infected. Those lacerations looked pretty deep last night. I’m not surprised that it hurts like hell. But all things considered, it looks like it’s healing fine.” He put a fresh dressing on it while she sat on the bed.

“Oh, shoot!” Juliana groaned and pointed to her closet door where a long, red dress hung on a hanger. “I was going to wear that to the wedding Saturday.”

“Now you can’t?”

“It’s a backless halter dress. The bandage will show.”

“Look at it this way, if you wear the dress, you won’t have anything pressing on the stitches.” He went over to inspect the dress and whistled softly as he lifted it from the door. It had an empire waist with a plunging V-necked halter. His fingertip slid down the neckline.

“I hope you wear it anyway, darlin’. You would look gorgeous.” His emphasis on the last word sent a thrill through her body that centered in her damp cunt. The fact that she was clad in only a towel added to her sense of vulnerability.

She smiled at him, feeling like she might just do that. “You think so?”

“You would be beautiful in it,” he replied, looking back at her. She had a feeling he might have said more but thought better of it. “Wear it for me?”

“I’ll try and find flesh-colored bandages tomorrow. It will look funny if I wear it with white tape and a gauze dressing. The bandage is so big. You don’t think it will look terrible?”

“No, everybody will be too busy admiring your pretty face and your blue eyes to even notice.”

“Sweet talker. Still want to take me out to eat?” she asked, feeling a little better now that she was sure it wasn’t getting infected. The pain reliever must have also kicked in because it hadn’t twinged in a while.

“Sure, if you feel up to it. How does your wrist feel?”

“It ached a little this morning, but it feels fine now. If only I could keep from clunking myself in the head with it,” she said with a chuckle, remembering thumping herself in the forehead as she brushed her hair away from her face several times during the day

* * * *

Juliana and Ash were seated at a quiet corner table at O’Reilly’s and enjoyed their meal and talked for a while. Juliana noticed that Ash had impeccable table manners.

Ash brought up the hours she worked and her need to take time off to heal in the short term, but also for pursuits that were not work related in the long term. It made her uncomfortable, and knowing how thin their staff was spread at Stigall’s, she couldn’t think about taking time off from her current schedule. Out of the goodness of their hearts, Evelyn and Leah were making her time off tonight possible, but this could not become a regular occurrence.

“I hate to see you so invested in a store that you don’t even own or co-own. You’re in a position of authority, but ultimately you answer to Mr. Woodworth, right? It’s because of him and his policies that you’re spread so thin, all of you that work there.”

“He wants to implement some of the strategies Leah has been suggesting. I told him we would give some of them a try. Things will get back to normal once she’s done with her experiments.”

“What if the bottom line shows improvements initially and he gives her leave to make other changes? What if the changes directly affect you?”

Juliana was becoming a little irked at Ash for pushing so hard at this sore subject. Part of her knew he pressed because he cared about her, but she was hoping for a change of topic. She didn’t want their evening together to end on a sour note.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, darlin’, have you thought that you may be training your replacement?”

Juliana sighed and sat back in her chair. He was too close for comfort now. “Could we talk about something else, please, Ash? Please? I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It is what it is, and I’m sorry if I seem so pig-headed about it.”

“I’m sorry. I got to thinking about it last night, and you must be going in way before the store opens and staying until after it’s closed, not occasionally but every day, including Sundays. How can you have a life if the store claims that many hours in a week?”

“It won’t always be that way, and those people are like my family. I don’t feel like my life is that hard.”

“What about relationships and the holidays and vacations? In a way, the store holds you hostage under the guise of responsibility. You should be allowed a life, time off with friends. Time for a relationship—”

“Ash.”

“With me, Juliana. Where would you fit in time for me?” he asked, leaning in so his question was asked as he stroked the top of her hand. He took her completely by surprise with his question, laying it on the line like that.

The events of the last few days had thrown her completely off-kilter, especially the last twenty-four hours. He pushed her buttons like crazy, he’d undressed her, seen her naked, washed her hair for her, and he still hadn’t really kissed her.

He was pushing her to examine her lifestyle because he wasn’t the type to sit on the backburner for long. With so many thoughts flitting through her mind, she wasn’t sure how to answer his question.

“I’m sorry, Juliana. I know I made you uncomfortable but I care about you.”

She smiled at him, hoping he would see that she wasn’t upset with him. “You made some valid points. I’ve developed this habit of spending all my time at the store, getting wrapped up in it until it’s become my life. If you were to become a prominent part of my life, I’d change things. I need to sit down with Leah and give her more responsibility. I wanted to go slow with her, you know?”

“Do you think you can succeed in doing that?” he asked, smiling but looking skeptical.

“Sure. I never intended to become a workaholic, but I guess I am. I’m good at what I do. When I’m given responsibility, I take it seriously, like anything I care about. Ash, I care about you,” she said, twining her fingers with his on the tabletop. “Do you think you could give me time? You know I can’t change the way things are overnight.”

“I’m hung up on the part about you caring about me, darlin’. I was afraid you were using the job as a shield so people couldn’t get too close.”

“No, I don’t think I do that. And yes, I am aware I may be training my replacement. Doug has been good to me over the years, and I’ve taken good care of his family’s store, so I don’t anticipate being fired

or anything like that, but a change may come. I think it's only natural for him to want to see his daughter running one of the family businesses. I hope it's not until after she's ready for the responsibility and I've secured another opportunity somewhere else."

"It's good to hear you talk like that. So you want to start dating?"

"Well, that would sort of be backing up, wouldn't it? I mean you've already seen me naked. I think that train has left the station. But we have gotten off to an interesting start, haven't we?" she asked with a chuckle, taking a sip of her iced tea. "To be honest, I'm not sure what our next move should be."

"For right now, I want to see you feeling better and not looking so tired. It's six-thirty right now. How would you like to go back to your house and watch a movie?"

"I could do that, but, Ash, I have to work tomorrow like normal."

"I know, darlin', me, too."

"I'll sit down with Leah, and we'll make some changes in her duties and my work schedule. But it will be gradual. I hope you understand that. I can't cut back to forty hours in one week, but I'll start shaving off a few of my early morning hours this week."

"That's good. I'm proud of you."

"Ash, I would—No matter what happens, I'd never want for you to feel like I was too busy for you."

"I'd do the same for you, Juliana. I know how it can get. Sometimes my hours are long and unpredictable. I'm glad that you're willing to carve out time for a life outside the store."

Ash took her home and stayed to watch a movie, but he left after it was over and he'd tucked her into bed. She'd taken a shower, and he'd applied a fresh dressing so he knew she was well prepared for the morning. Juliana had assured him she would be fine and agreed readily when he offered to bring her lunch.

"Is there anything else you need before I go, darlin'?"

The small lamp by her bed provided the only light, and he waited as she looked at him from her pillows. Her eyes traced over his

handsomely chiseled face and his firm jaw, covered by his sexy muttonchops sideburns and moustache. She nodded as she hooked a finger in the neck of his shirt and pulled him to her. When he realized what she wanted, his eyes crinkled at the corners, and he smiled as he lowered his full lips to hers.

He braced his weight on his arms so that he didn't press her into the bed at all, and gave her a gentle but searing kiss that curled her toes. Juliana laid an arm over one of his shoulders to keep him close, and he deepened the kiss, skimming the recesses of her mouth and dueling unhurriedly with her tongue. He backed off to trace his lower lip across hers and tickled her with his moustache, making her shiver and giggle, then he plunged in for another intense kiss. They were both totally absorbed in the other and breathless when he finally sat up.

"Now why in the hell have I not done that sooner?" Ash muttered.

"Because I was too busy being a heinous bitch, remember? Damn, if I'd known you kissed like that, I would have been kissing you the moment I hung up the phone with Lawrence on Christmas night."

"Why, thank you, darlin'. You're sweet as honey yourself. I'd better go now so you can rest."

No, stay and don't let me rest.

* * * *

On the way home, Ash had a weird, unsettled feeling. He didn't like leaving her to fend for herself. He felt a burden of guilt for the condition she was in because of his lack of forethought the day before. She needed to get her rest, and he needed to be at the ranch for work early the next morning. Leaving her warm in her bed and going home alone to his empty, cold bed was depressing.

He should feel happy that she wanted to spend time with him and give the attraction between the two of them a chance to grow. Even walking into the house the ranch hands shared didn't cheer him all

that much when they all greeted him from the kitchen or living room where they were watching ESPN. After making small talk and answering their inquiries about Juliana, he went on to his bedroom, showered, and went to bed. As he stripped off his robe and settled naked under his sheet and blankets, he wondered if she was already asleep and hoped she was comfortable.

He lay there with the light from the moon shining on his bedroom window and remembered his encounter with the fair queen contestants earlier that afternoon. They'd flirted with him harmlessly, and one of them had asked him if he was married. Right about the time the young woman asked, he'd spied Juliana. He'd pointed her out to the girls and said, "You see that redheaded beauty over there? *She's* my wife. She just doesn't know it yet." They'd all giggled and sighed telling him how romantic they thought he was. He'd meant every word of it.

Chapter Seven

Early Friday evening, Juliana took out her cell phone and dialed Ash's number. Her stress level was going straight through the roof. "Ash?"

"Hey, darlin', what's up?"

"I'm sorry, but I've got to work late tonight if I want to be off for Teresa's wedding tomorrow. More freight came in, and they aren't done rotating the Valentine's Day stock out onto the sales floor. Two of my stockroom employees are down with the flu."

"I've got two down with it here, too. Makes for a long day when that happens. I'm done for the day. Would you like me to come and help you?"

"It's thoughtful of you, but if you came to help me, I'm not sure how much actual work I'd get done," she replied with a chuckle.

"But I get brownie points for being willing?"

She smiled at the relaxed good humor in his sexy voice. "Big-time brownie points. Thank you for understanding."

"I do. You've got a store to run. Will there be people there to help you? What about Leah?"

"Yes, I'll have help. I've called in two other workers to come in, so I won't be here alone. I didn't ask Leah because she's covering for me tomorrow evening so I can be there for the wedding."

"She okay about the change in her duties?"

"She does seem a little disgruntled, and I think you may have been right in your assumption the other night, but I can't talk about that right now."

“I understand, darlin’. I hope you don’t have to work too late. Have you eaten supper?”

She wanted to kiss him for not lecturing her at the moment. “Yes. I was afraid you’d be upset. Thanks for understanding.”

“How are you feeling? Is your back still bothering you?”

“Yes, it’s twinging painfully. I think a nerve must have gotten damaged, but it’s okay otherwise. My wrist feels fine, awkward but fine. I’m sorry I won’t get to see you.”

“Me, too. Darlin’, I’m not your boss, but please don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t overdo it. They just need someone to direct them and help out. If we can get it all off the five-highs and onto the sales floor, then they can stock it in the morning, but I’m looking at a mountain of boxes. That’s the part that has me worried because I know there’s Valentine’s Day merchandise in those boxes. It can’t stay back here.”

“Cupid waits for no man. Don’t work too hard.”

“Thank you. I’ll be careful. Bye.”

Juliana sighed in relief. The worst part about all this was telling Ash she wouldn’t see him that night. She’d been worried he’d accuse of her of not being able to give up her workaholic lifestyle. She’d sat down with Leah and Evelyn earlier and talked with them, detailing a few changes she was making in operations. Juliana had Evelyn’s full backing in the changes, which shaved a full seven hours off of her work week. Leah was happy with the current status quo because it left her a lot of time to enact some of her changes, which still weren’t bearing fruit. That newsletter had to go. Leah hadn’t been recalcitrant about the changes so much as trying to figure out how she would accomplish it all.

Welcome to my world.

Being given more responsibility had helped Leah’s outlook some. Juliana had already called Doug to let him know. He didn’t keep up with her hours and had no idea that it’d gotten that bad, but he was still pushing for Juliana to let Leah make her changes while

supporting Juliana as she turned over more responsibility to his daughter. She should have felt relieved, but there was a small part of her that wondered if maybe Doug hadn't been hoping to see that happen anyway. He'd hinted that he had some changes in the works for the store, though gave her no details. Doug was always one to hold his cards close, not letting others know what he was up to until the last minute.

It was a long evening for her, and by the time she fell into bed at eleven thirty, she was beyond exhausted, and her body simply ached. If Ash could see her now, he would fuss, and she'd have nobody but herself to blame. Using her arms and shoulders too much throughout the evening had made the pain in her back almost unbearable. During the evening, she'd hadn't taken the pain reliever because it upset her stomach but took one right before she climbed into bed so that she'd be able to sleep.

After waking up early, Juliana had struggled through getting herself ready for work then stopped to pick up breakfast tacos for all the morning crew that had agreed to come in and help put the stock away. She took another pain reliever while she ate because she had a feeling she was going to need it.

* * * *

Ash found her in the stockroom, on the top step of a tall rolling stepladder. Her smile faded when she saw his face. She lowered the plastic-wrapped dresses on the extension pole to the employee waiting below then slowly descended down the steps. Ash held his peace while she gave directions to the employee about what else needed to be gotten down, and then she beckoned him to come with her through the stockroom to her office.

"I brought some lunch for you."

"Thank you," she murmured as she opened her office door. The succulent smell of cheese enchiladas from Rudy's filled the room.

“Oh, that is heavenly. Okay, you can fuss at me now,” she said as she closed her door behind him.

“I’m not going to fuss at you, darlin’, though I do question whether or not you are living within your limitations right now.”

“I’m used to doing that job. It’s easier for me to get up there and hand down what they need. Otherwise, they’d bring it all down at one time. I spent some time with Leah up there this morning, discussing the importance of separating the boxes by seasonal code before letting them stock the upper racks.”

“With both your hands being injured, it scared me to see you up there so high. What if you’d slipped coming down?”

“You saw how careful I was coming down. I take my time, and I’m careful while I’m up there. But I won’t be climbing anymore today. That was the last of it, which is a good thing because my shoulder is killing me.”

“Is Leah still put out about the changes you’re trying to make?”

“Oh, no. She came in this morning ready to learn. I think she talked to her dad. Leah’s teachable, and I like that about her. She doesn’t just want it done her way because it’s her Daddy’s store. She’s disappointed that she won’t have time for some of her projects, but I think she’s okay with the increase in responsibility. You’ll be happy to know I’ve scheduled myself for seven fewer hours next week, one per day.”

“Wow, what’s got into you, girl?” Ash teased, settling in the chair in front of her desk.

Juliana shrugged and grinned at him as she peeked in the Styrofoam box and rolled her eyes at the heavenly aroma. “Oh, there’s this guy...”

“Bet he’ll be relieved to see you not working so hard, taking time for yourself.”

“It’s not easy for me to release control like that when I’m so used to doing things a certain way. There’s more room for error.”

“But that’s how she’ll learn. They all will. You’re real big on taking responsibility, but they have to be responsible, too. Otherwise, it’s all on you. I’d like to see some of that burden come off of those pretty shoulders.”

“Sweet talker. Now if I could just get Doug to back off from making the big change Leah’s proposing. I don’t want to think about the fallout from all that.”

“All what?”

“She wants to eliminate commission sales and have everyone go to straight hourly status, or regular salaries like I am.”

“Shoot. Even I know that’s not going to be a popular change around here. Commissions are what motivates a lot of your workers.”

“Exactly. But sometimes experience is the best teacher, and I’d rather do this with her during these months than during the Christmas holidays, you know? But things may get worse with my hours before it gets better.”

“Stick to your convictions, darlin’.” She was still overworking herself, but Ash admired the fact that her foremost concern was for her employees.

“I will, but, Ash, if it gets nuts for a while, please don’t think it’s because I don’t want it to get better. I worked myself into this mess, and I’ll need time to get through it.”

“I know it. Well, I’m going to get out of your hair now. Everybody’s out at the ranch playing worker bee for Grace, getting the food done and the decorations for the wedding put up. I’m going to help out with directing traffic and parking. What time are you taking off?”

“Three. I have an appointment to get my nails and hair done, so I won’t have to fiddle with it with my bum hands. My hair stylist is a good friend, and she’s going to help me get dressed at the salon.”

“I’m available to come and help if you need me,” he said, sitting on the edge of her desk.

She smiled up at him and said, "I know you are, cowboy, but I want to get back some of the mystery. You seeing me naked before the wedding is kind of anticlimactic. I'd rather show up looking pretty and put together, and my friend doesn't mind."

"On the contrary, darlin', seeing you naked would be very 'climactic.'"

"Har-har. Nope, you'll get to see me all dolled up, without also knowing how much effort it took to get me that way. I want to surprise you."

"Seeing you naked would be a great surprise."

"Yeah, with my big, clunky cast and stitches all over my back, very sexy."

"You're beautiful no matter what, darlin'. You won't go for it, so I'll leave you to finish your lunch."

Juliana took a sip of her tea and stood up as he did. "Thanks again for lunch. You brightened my day." She went to him, and he wrapped his arms around her carefully. He tipped her chin up and looked into her pale blue eyes. Her scent filled his nostrils and stirred his senses as he kissed her gently. She felt delicate in his arms, and he was mindful of not squeezing her too hard. Her tender lips opened, and he deepened their kiss, stroking her tongue with his. His cock responded instantaneously as she enthusiastically returned his kiss, moaning quietly to him and snuggling close in his embrace. He smiled with satisfaction at the dazed look in her eyes as he released her.

"You're welcome, darlin'. I'll see you at the ranch."

* * * *

Ash stood on the driveway of the Divine Creek Ranch, directing drivers to the wide expanse of grass along the fenced pasture to one side of the drive.

He turned and looked up the driveway, smiling when he recognized Juliana's white Camaro cruising down the driveway. He'd

been looking forward to seeing her in her red dress. He stepped to the edge of the driveway as she pulled up, another car directly behind her. He squatted down and smiled at her.

“Damn, darlin’, you look gorgeous. Why don’t you park next to the Cadillac, and I’ll help you get out of the car.”

He gestured to the driver behind her, indicating they should pull in beside her. There were no more cars coming for the moment, so he walked over to her driver’s side door and opened it for her. He smiled when he saw the long slit in the dress she wore, which showed her ivory skin clear up to above her knee. She smiled up at him as she took the hand he offered.

“Now see? You get to see me all put together.”

“And absolutely stunning, darlin’,” he said, twirling his finger so she would turn for him.

The dark red made her ivory skin seem radiant in the fading sunlight. Her eyes sparkled as if she enjoyed the admiration in his gaze. His eyes drank her in, all the way down to the sexy heels she wore.

“I take it you like the dress?”

“You glow tonight,” he said, smiling at her reaction to his compliment, a measure of disbelief and gratitude.

“Thank you,” she said, blushing when he pulled her to him. He slid one hand around her waist, his fingertips sensing her body heat through the slinky fabric of the dress as they drifted down over her hip. He felt her tremble slightly as he traced a finger along the inner edge of the deep V-neck halter, not stopping until it reached between her full breasts. He looked up into her eyes, knowing she could probably see lust there. He didn’t try to hide it and was pleasantly surprised to see it mirrored in her sky-blue eyes.

“You’re looking handsome yourself, cowboy.” He smiled, glad he’d pleased her. When he’d told Rosemary what Juliana was wearing earlier that day at Cheaver’s, she’d helped him find a dark red twill shirt that would coordinate nicely with her dress, and he’d worn it

with the freshly pressed black jeans and his black snakeskin cowboy boots, which he'd taken the time to polish up. He was also wearing his new black felt Stetson his sister had sent him for Christmas.

She shuddered lightly when his fingertip brushed the flesh between her breasts, and he growled softly when he saw her nipples peak. He lifted his hand to her jawbone and slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck. His thumb tipped her chin, and he slowly lowered his lips to hers in a tender kiss, encouraged by the faint moan that escaped her lips as she parted them for his exploration. He'd never experienced a sweeter kisser than Juliana as she leaned into him, clinging to him while he stroked the silken recesses of her mouth.

The spell was broken by the opening of the car doors next to hers and the conversation that continued as the occupants of the vehicle climbed out before suddenly going quiet. He drew back from her lips long enough to greet the elderly wedding guests who were smiling indulgently at them.

"Evening, folks. If you'll follow the driveway down, the wedding party is at the back of the house. Just walk toward the music."

"Thank you, sir. Sorry to interrupt," the husband said with a wink before taking his little wife by the hand and leading her onto the driveway.

Juliana caught her breath and said, "I—I'd better let you get back to work out here. There are more vehicles coming down the drive. I—oh—"

He leaned down and kissed her a little harder a second time before saying, "I guess that one will have to tide me over."

"Uh—wow," she whispered. "You—"

He smiled broadly as she fumbled for intelligent speech. "That good?" he asked hopefully.

"Yeah-uh-huh. Hmmm." She sighed shakily. "My gift is in the trunk." She pressed the release button on her remote, and he lifted the box wrapped in shiny white paper out of the trunk for her.

Handing it to her, he caressed her jaw and kissed her one more time. "Save me a seat beside you?"

"Sure. I'll see you in a few minutes."

He watched in utter male appreciation as she stepped away from him, up onto the concrete drive. Looking back, she blushed when she found his eyes were still on her. He watched her hips sway as she walked away. Her heels were high, accentuating her long legs.

The mild evening breeze pressed the long skirt of the dress against her right side, conforming the fabric to the curve of her hip and thigh, and he felt himself harden. The wind fluttered her hair a little, and he thought he caught a whiff of her perfume. The sway of her derriere was hypnotic, and he didn't look away until he heard another car pull up to him on the driveway. When he looked up to find her departing form, she was turning the corner around to the back of the house.

* * * *

Juliana stood watching the reception with Grace Warner. Guests were gathered around the bridal party, congregating at tables, eating cake, or taking a turn on the dance floor. Juliana thought Teresa looked radiant, and the grooms were ruggedly handsome as they gazed adoringly at her.

"Grace, you've done a fantastic job of planning Teresa's wedding. You could make a mint doing this for others as an independent event planner."

Grace smiled and shook her head. "We're a close-knit family, which makes this a pleasure to pull together. Speaking of being close knit, how come you never told me Lawrence broke up with you Christmas night? I had to find out from Evelyn. You should've told me. Then we could've gone and toilet papered his house. Charity would've helped."

Juliana shrugged. "I needed to be alone. Ash tried to get me to stay. He said I shouldn't run and hide. Kinda pissed me off a little. He also thinks I'm a workaholic."

"How'd that shoe feel?" Grace said, smirking.

"Very funny. I know, but I'm here, right?"

"Yeah, I'm impressed. I honestly didn't expect you to show up until after you'd closed the store."

"I've really let my friendships lapse when that's what people expect from me. I would've hated missing her wedding. So, *that's* Joaquin, huh?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"And he's—they're—"

"Yep. Look, aren't they sweet together?" she said as Teresa danced once again with Angel. She would never have thought Teresa would fall for two men, not given her history. Juliana supposed it depended on the men.

"She's lovely tonight. You really only had five days to put all this together?"

"Yep." Grace turned to her and smiled speculatively. "Which reminds me, when you admit you're head over heels in love with that gorgeous cowboy over there, who's watching you as we speak, I'll be happy to plan your wedding, too. When he asks you."

Juliana scoffed but gazed longingly at the cowboy in question. "I doubt that's going to happen. We're like oil and water." As the words left her lips, she knew it was an excuse.

"Hmmm, looks more like gas and a lit match from where I'm standing. Lawrence was a complete ass. Ash loves you, and it's obvious you love him," Grace said with a confident wave of her hand. "You just have some kinks to work out, that's all. Just remember that offer will still stand once you settle your differences."

Juliana shrugged and then grimaced as the stitches on her back pulled with the movement. Ash, who'd been watching her, began making his way toward them across the yard.

Grace leaned toward Juliana. "Look at his face. That's the look of a man that cares deeply about a woman. He's been watching you because he's worried about you. He feels responsible for your injuries," Grace said, indicating the cast on her wrist before turning to Ash, who now stood beside them.

"Hello, Ash. Thank you for helping with parking. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Grace. I was happy to help." He turned to Juliana, concern obvious in his eyes, and asked, "Darlin', are you okay? You look like you're hurting."

As if to reinforce the fact, a sharp pain zinged through her shoulder. She flinched again and groaned. "It's that shooting pain again. I meant to take a pain pill before I left the salon, but I left them home in my other purse."

To Ash, Grace said, "There's Tylenol 3 in Ethan and Adam's bathroom medicine cabinet. Why don't you take her inside, Ash, and get her some? There's also gauze and tape if she needs a new dressing."

Juliana needed some relief, so she allowed Ash to draw her toward the house. Another pain shot across her shoulder blade. She thought it was total overkill when Ash lifted her into his arms and carried her up the steps.

"I'm sorry I didn't ask earlier about your shoulder, Juliana. I meant to, but I was distracted."

"I can't believe I left the pain pills at home. I was hoping I could tough it out." He said nothing to indicate it, but she could tell that beyond his obvious concern, he was also put out with her.

"The Tylenol 3 will help." He set her down in the living room and led her down a hallway to one of the bathrooms in the ranch house. He lifted her to sit on the marble countertop like she weighed nothing and peeled the adhesive backing on the flesh-colored bandage back. "The stitches all look fine, darlin'. You must have overdone it last night or this morning, and now you're sore."

He handed her a couple of capsules and filled a disposable cup with water. Standing there, watching her with his hands on his trim hips, Juliana could almost hear the gears turning. She looked in his eyes, torn between wariness and defensiveness and waited for his edict, imagining what he would say.

You work too hard.

Your hours are too long.

You need to take time off.

You need to stop pushing yourself so hard.

Ash sighed deeply and asked, “What are your hours tomorrow?”

She frowned, thrown for a loop. “It’s a Sunday, so I’ll only work from ten to two. Why?”

“We’re leaving here at eight-thirty. I’m following you home. I’m putting you to bed as soon as we get home, and I’m not letting you get up until you have barely enough time to get ready and be at work at ten on the dot. After work, I’ll pick you up and take you back home, and then I’m putting you back to bed again. You’re staying in bed the rest of the day, *even if I have to physically keep you there.*”

As he spoke, she bristled, her backbone going straight and rigid, her hands forming into fists. “Now listen here, you big, overgrown—”

“Big enough to tie you to your bed if you fight me.” The gleam in his eyes told her he meant every word.

She hopped down off of the countertop and stomped out of the bathroom into the hallway. “You will do no such thing. You’re not my keeper, and I don’t need you lecturing me—”

Grasping her around the waist to stop her, he pulled her into the bedroom across the hallway. Quietly, he closed the bedroom door behind them as he said in a succinct tone, “I’m not lecturing you because you don’t listen. You pushed yourself until you’re in agony, and now you’re going to rest. There is no *shoulda*, *woulda*, *coulda*. I’m telling you what you’re *going to* do,” he stated in a low, husky drawl as he drew closer to her until her ass was pressed against the

heavy wooden dresser. “You’re slowing down the healing process by not taking this time to recover.”

She didn’t like that he was crowding her and pressed her forearms against his chest, but he didn’t budge. He was seriously pissing her off, and she sharply said, “I’m not some fragile china doll!”

Chapter Eight

Ash surprised her as he yelled unexpectedly, “I *know!* And I’m tired of having to handle you like one!” and reached for her, grasping her by her hips and yanking her forward until her hips were crushed against his groin. His hands were unyielding on her tender flesh, and she gasped when she felt the steely erection inside his blue jeans.

Her cunt pulsed as he grasped the back of her head and drew her to his lips in a hard, passionate kiss. She struggled against him, trying to fist the fabric of his shirt without success because of the cast and stitches. As if that were her signal that he was right, she stopped fighting him altogether. A moan escaped her lips as his kiss gentled, until his lips were lightly brushing against hers, his tongue flicking out to lick her lips as if in apology for being so rough with her before.

“I’ve been hard for you all night, looking at you in that dress. I want to listen to you make little moaning sounds like that while I make love to you, and I want to hear you scream when you come for me. I want you so much you’re all I can think of, damn it.” His lips pressed against her throat, sounding tortured.

Juliana knew if he pressed her to him again, as turned on as she was by his touch, his words and his rough handling, she’d come right then and there. Her clit pulsed, aching for that push over the brink. Juliana had no idea why she reacted so explosively to his strong hands mastering her body. She knew without a doubt that he’d never force her or harm her, and she felt as desperate for him as he sounded.

She looked up into his turbulent eyes and didn’t doubt his need. He was as hard as a rock beneath his jeans. She felt her pussy pulse again, aching to be filled by him. Leaning into him for another kiss,

Juliana reached to the side of the dress and slid the zipper down until the inner closure came completely loose, while simultaneously reaching up to the back of her neck with the other hand and pulling on the ties of the halter top. When the dress came loose around her, she reached in and pulled on the ties of her silk G-string. Ash became aware of what she was doing and he groaned harshly, his hands grasping at her hips. As she reached around his neck, her bare breasts pillowed against his chest. His questing hands were warm and rough cupping her breasts, and she gasped when he rubbed her nipples with his thumbs.

“Darlin’, what are you doing?” he whispered against her throat. “You’re tempting me beyond what I can endure.”

“I’m not tempting you.”

“I thought you were mad at me?”

“I’m done fighting you, Ash. I want you.” Juliana shifted and allowed the dressed and untied G-string to fall to the floor. Ash eyed her standing there naked in her high heels as he bent to retrieve the articles of clothing and placed them on the dresser. She reached for the lock on the doorknob. He palmed her abdomen then his hands slid over her thighs, parting them. His fingertips strayed through the damp curls over her mons. She clutched his biceps and whimpered when his finger slipped into her embarrassingly wet slit, stroking over her clit then beyond it to her pulsing inner lips.

“Darlin’,” he groaned, sounding like he was being tortured.

“I’ve been wet for you all evening, Ash. You affect me, too, you see? It’s not any easier for me.”

He looked up into her eyes, desire swirling in his turquoise gaze as he kissed her again and stroked his fingers over her cunt. She tried to be quiet, but she couldn’t stop the moan that escaped her lips.

“Oh, God, Ash.” She felt her overexcited body already racing to orgasm. He looked into her eyes and must have seen her need. Grasping her thighs, he spread them and knelt in front of her.

“I’ve been looking forward to this moment since the first time I looked into your eyes, darlin’.”

She moaned as his hot mouth descended on her pussy. His callused hands stroked her thighs, lifting one to rest over his shoulder, without ever removing his hot mouth and talented tongue from her pussy. An ecstatic scream bubbled up inside her as he suckled at her pussy lips and her clit and slid his tongue inside her cunt.

“You taste even better than I dreamed you would, darlin’, pure and sweet.”

“I feel awkward against this dresser. What—what do you want me to do?” she panted. There was no way for her to reciprocate and she wasn’t even sure whose bedroom they were in.

“I only want you to do one thing,” he murmured before returning his tongue to her clit. “I want you to come for me.” He laved his tongue through her cunt, licking and tasting her arousal, rumbling quietly as more seeped from her pussy for him. He closed his lips on the flesh surrounding her clitoris, sucking and tonguing it repeatedly. He established a languorous rhythm and growled again when she whimpered as her climax crested.

“Ash,” she whispered shakily, “Ash, oh God, I’m coming!” Her head fell back, and her breathing turned to soft sobs. Her hips flexed in a powerful rhythm as she took what he gave her.

She responded so explosively to him, and he hadn’t even slid a finger inside her yet. He stole a few more moments, licking her cream from her cunt. His tongue returned to her clit, not giving her time to come too far down, and began stroking her again, raising her to greater heights.

She reached for him, whispering, “I need you Ash. I need to feel you inside me, please.”

“I’m a bastard for doing this to you while you’re in pain.”

“Trust me, I’m feeling no pain right now. Please, baby, we can do whatever you want to do later. You can even tie me to the bed if you want to, but I need you inside me *right now*.” She pulled desperately

at his belt until he finally took over for her and unbuttoned his jeans and slid them and his briefs down a bit. She got her first good look at his cock, and the sight of it made her heart pound. A new ache began in her cunt as her body begged to be filled with it.

“Your cock is beautiful, Ash. So thick,” she murmured as she reached for it, causing him to groan throatily as her hand closed around it, stroking him, positioning the head at her quivering pussy. “Please, I want to feel you inside me.” He pressed his steely erection to her, growling as he met with her taut resistance.

“Damn, you’re tight, Juliana. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t, honey. Just give it to me slow,” she whispered, flexing her hips and moaning when she felt him slide in a few inches. His face showed the strain of giving her a chance to get used to his girth before pressing on. He backed out and thrust in with short, gentle strokes, coating his cock with her lubrication and sliding in a bit farther with each new surge. Her pussy tingled as he filled it with his gorgeous cock. He lifted her so her ass was perched on the dresser, and she wrapped her legs around his hips as he held them while pumping into her. Something rattled on the dresser as she braced her elbows behind her. She imagined how erotic they must look, entangled against the dresser in the dim light of the cozy bedroom.

“How does it feel, darlin’? Do you like my cock inside you?”

“I love the way you fill me so full.” His cock was so thick it drew along her clitoris with each stroke, assuring her that she wouldn’t wait long for the next orgasm. She wished she could move more with him but couldn’t on the dresser.

“Your little pussy is clenching me so tightly. You have no idea how good you feel. Damn, girl, I love it when you do that!” He growled when she gripped him with her pussy muscles firmly on each back stroke. The warning sizzles began leaping deep in her cunt.

“My pussy doesn’t want you to leave. Ash, I feel it. It’s coming. You feel so good—Oh! I’m coming! Please don’t stop.” She moaned

as her cunt flooded with more juice for him. He gripped her thighs firmly and fucked her with deep, rhythmic strokes.

“Oh, yes, you’re perfect, darlin’. Just fucking perfect. Right there? Yeah, darlin’, come for me again.”

Her back arched, and she was seized by yet another orgasm, this one more intense than the last one as her pussy convulsed on his hard length. He groaned harshly as he came.

“Oh, fuck yes!” His cum pulsed into her with each long, powerful stroke. He pressed his lips to her breasts and suckled lovingly at her nipples as they caught their breath and came down from the incredible high, his cock still large and hard within her.

Then he groaned and rested his forehead on her breast bone for a moment before looking up at her in apology. “Damn it. I’m so sorry, Juliana. I wasn’t wearing a condom.”

The look in her eyes must’ve told him what he needed to know.

“Oh no,” she whispered, panic stirring. “Oh, no. I can’t believe I didn’t think about birth control. I’m not on the pill. Lawrence had a vasectomy. Oh, I’m so *stupid*. I’m sorry, Ash. I got checked out earlier this week, and all my test results were normal after the breakup, but I’m not on the pill. I’m sorry. I should’ve said something.”

“No, darlin’. I was so busy rutting after you I didn’t even think. I should’ve asked you beforehand.”

“I can’t believe I was that irresponsible.”

He smiled at her. “Responsible is your middle name. Darlin’, I promise I’ll take full responsibility. I’m sorry.” He pulled from her, stroking her pussy after his cock left her, making her moan softly.

“That was so good, Ash. I can’t believe we made love in here. I don’t even know whose bedroom this is.” She giggled as she looked around the room and noted the framed portrait on one wall of a sassy bare-legged Grace posed in a black low-cut top. It must be one of the men’s bedrooms. Ash helped her sit up and wrapped his arms around her.

“Still feeling no pain?”

“Yep, the Tylenol 3 must’ve kicked in,” she whispered as he helped her with the ties on her silk G-string then helped her back into her dress, commenting on how much he liked the easy access it offered. After she was put back together, he kissed her.

“I’ll slip out now. Wait a few minutes then come out back. I’ll be watching for you.”

“Okay, I need to fix my lipstick and powder my nose anyway.”

He kissed her nose and said, “You look even more beautiful now, darlin’. I’ll watch for you. Remember, we’re leaving here at eight-thirty.”

She grinned at him. “Yes, sir. But we have to make a stop on the way home.”

“Hmmm?”

“Yes, for condoms.”

He smiled back at her. “You sure about that, darlin? The idea was for you to rest.”

“Yeah, like I could get away with not resting with you bossing me around. We’ll have plenty of time for making love, I think.”

“Yes, ma’am. Never let it be said I denied a lady what she wanted.”

* * * *

Juliana’s body still vibrated and hummed when she ventured out five minutes later, tidied up, put back together, hair repaired as well as it could be. Because he was so tall and wearing that red shirt, Ash was easy to spot across the dance floor, talking with Angel and Jack. She made her way down the steps and nearly tripped over the last one when Grace met her going into the house.

“Well! You’re looking like you’re feeling better. You must’ve found the Tylenol 3 okay. How are your stitches?”

“Oh, they’re fine. Thanks for the Tylenol. It’s helping a lot.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. If you don’t mind me saying so, Juliana, you look positively radiant. That wouldn’t have anything to do with your knight in shining armor over there, now would it? Oooh! Now you’re beet red. That must be a resounding yes!”

“Yes, *Miss Nosey*, it has everything to do with him.”

“See? It will all work out if you just give it a chance.”

“I’ll bet he’s over there planning our getaway.”

“Are you leaving soon?”

“Yes, at eight-thirty on the dot, according to *Mister Bossy* over there.”

“Well, make sure you get your rest. You look like you could use a few hours of sleep, no offense.”

“None taken. That’s exactly what he says I’m doing, even if he has to tie me to the bed. His exact words.”

Grace gasped in delight and glanced over at Ash. He was looking directly at them, grinning. “He did not! He told you that? Oooh! Be bad and see if he’ll actually do it! Then get me details! Here he comes.”

“Yes, I see that,” Juliana replied as she watched him appreciatively.

“Mmmm, and he only has eyes for you. I’ll bet he’s been busy making plans.”

“As long as they involve a bed and at least a little sleep, I’m game.”

“Thatagirl! Well, give me a hug and say good-bye. By the way, did you know Ash will be moving soon? Jack and his crew will be breaking ground on Angel’s new ranch house. It should be done in the summer. After they get into it, the foreman’s house will be Ash’s, and they plan to do renovations to it, as well.”

“Good to know. He’ll have a place of his own and more privacy.”

“He seemed to like the idea of being on his own again when he found out that it would be available soon.”

“He was talking to Jack and Angel. I hope he’s not taking time off from work because of me.”

“If he did, it’s because they understand and don’t mind covering for him. It’s important to him that you’re okay, and I can promise you that any of our men would do the same for Teresa or me. With Angel and Joaquin gone, nothing much is planned for the next few days, and they were all going to be picking up the slack anyway. Hello, Ash. Juliana looks like she feels much better. You must have the magic touch.”

You have no idea. Grace winked at her, and Juliana thought maybe she did.

Ash glanced at Juliana and grinned roguishly. “You’d have to ask Juliana about that. She looks like she feels better to me, too. I think we’re about ready to go.”

“See you later,” Grace said. As they turned to go, Juliana glanced back at her friend, and Grace gave her the universal sign for “call me,” thumb to the ear and pinky to the chin, before waving happily at them.

After saying their farewells, they parted to go to their vehicles. Ash pulled his big dually pickup behind her Camaro as she climbed into it and started the engine. Her phone rang inside her purse and she pulled it out to answer it. “Missing me already?”

“Darlin’, I’ll make that stop at the drugstore on the way through town. You go on to the house. Is there anything else you need?”

She glanced in the mirror at him. “If you could also pick up some lubricant, that would probably be a good thing.”

“I’m hard as a fricking rock now. Are you sore?”

“No, but it would be a good thing to have if you plan on making love to me again.”

“If I plan on making love to you again? I plan on making love to you as long and as often as I can. Maybe I better double up on both?”

She giggled. “I can just see you at the checkout lane with an economy size box of condoms and extra lubricant.”

“It’s worth it if the end result is more of your sweet loving.”

All she could do was shudder and sigh into the phone and fantasize about what had happened earlier as he’d slid his huge cock into her. It made her cunt pulse and tingle at the memory.

“You’re imagining it, aren’t you?” He growled, having heard her needy sigh.

“Yes.”

“When you get home, I want you to strip naked and then get in the shower. I’ll meet you there.” Her pussy quivered in submissive delight. He was playful and bossy, but she was beginning to love him for it.

“Okay. Ash?”

“What, darlin’?”

“I—um. I—I’ll see you there.”

“Anything else on your mind?”

“Um, no. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“Be careful. It may start raining soon.”

“I will. Bye.”

Her heart shuddered in her chest as she ended the call. She’d almost said the words. It had felt so easy and natural she’d almost told him she loved him over the phone. How could she possibly love him? She’d known him less than a month. What scared her most, though, was how easy it had felt, those words bubbling up in her throat. She’d wanted to say them but held them back at the last second. Over the phone was not how she wanted it to be if she told him.

* * * *

Ash pulled into the drugstore parking lot in a hurry. He smiled, remembering the quality her voice had as their phone call ended. She’d wanted to say something but hadn’t. She’d been imagining making love to him, and it had him feeling as though he was carrying a steel pole in his jeans. He’d come hard not even an hour ago, and he

was more than ready to have another go. Lucky for him, he was wearing snug knit boxers, jeans, and a barn jacket to cover the monster erection he was sporting. Not that it did much good, if he was going by the blushing smirk on the face of the middle-aged, overweight male cashier that waited on him when he put the condoms and lube on the counter.

The hint of something in her voice kept him on edge and in a hurry. He just wanted out of there and on the road. It wasn't even necessarily about his dick, although that was certainly part of it as it ached for another release inside her heavenly pussy. That uncertain, hesitant quality in her voice brought out a protective side in him, the part that wanted to hold her and show her it would be all right.

He parked at the end of her drive, next to her Camaro, and stepped in through the back door, locking and dead-bolting it behind him. He heard the sound of the shower running and walked back to her bedroom, placing the box of condoms and lubricant on her bedside table. He undressed as he listened to her hum to herself in the shower. Completely nude, he walked to her bathroom door and slipped in, making his presence known.

"Darlin'? You all right?"

"Hi," she said softly. "Yes, but I need you to peel the bandage off for me." She was facing the showerhead and looked over her shoulder at him as he stepped into the shower behind her. Blushing when her eyes trailed down his abdomen to the thick rod that jutted from his groin as though it were seeking her out, she murmured, "Mmmm." She turned her head into the spray, rinsing the remnants of shampoo from her hair.

He reached for the corner of the bandage and carefully peeled it from her skin then tossed it into her trash can. "It looks good, darlin'." Speaking of which," he said as his hands smoothed over her shoulders. He stepped up behind her, his erection brushing her derriere. "You look pretty good, too. I'd never claim to be a poet, but you take my breath away."

Ash stroked her upper arms, his fingertips curving inward to cup her generous, firm breasts, strumming her nipples with his thumbs. “Darlin’, I want to wallow in these beautiful breasts, fall asleep against them, and suckle on them while I make love to you.” He felt a tremor go through her as she turned to him, holding on to his bicep.

“I love that your body is so soft and curvy, womanly, but supple and strong, too. This tummy,” he murmured, stroking down her torso to just past her bellybutton, “needs my kisses, and this sweet little pussy.” His fingers strayed further into her drenched cunt. “Darlin’, you’re very wet, aren’t you?” He rumbled deep in his chest, filled with lust for her. His dick pulsed in agreement against her abdomen.

The primal sound caused her body to cream for him even more. “Y–yes Ash. I need you. I need to feel you in me again. It feels like I’m going to go up in flames I want you so much.”

“Let me bathe, and then you can have me.”

She smiled up at him. “All my soaps smell girly.”

He grinned down at her, sliding a finger on her cheek. “That’s all right, darlin’. Whatever kind of soap or shampoo you have is fine.”

Juliana allowed him to play with her breasts, covering them in soap again. She laughed when he lathered up his hair, beard, and muttonchops and wallowed between her breasts like he’d said he wanted to, before rinsing his hair and face. After carefully lathering her hand, she palmed his rock-hard cock, stroking up and down, smoothing over the head and caressing his heavy scrotum and squeezing ever so slightly.

Closing his eyes, Ash focused his attention on self-control, not wanting to come until he was inside her again, although he doubted multiple orgasms were going to be an issue that night.

Chapter Nine

Ash was so tall, brawny, and rough, but there were parts of him that Juliana wanted to curl up into, or onto, as the case may be. His cock was bone-hard, thick, and intimidating but so silky on the outside. Her pussy should be clamoring in fear, but instead it was seeping her juices, pulsing for the feel of every ridge and vein, wanting him to fill her to overflowing.

Her cunt felt swollen, and her clit ached, wanting that lip-stretching glide that insured she'd come every time he entered her. With Ash, she didn't have to fantasize like she'd had to with Lawrence if she wanted to get off. She shivered, and her pussy throbbed when he groaned as she stroked his hard length with relish.

Smiling up at him, Juliana said, "If I was able, I'd use both hands on this glorious monster." She would've played longer, but he placed his hands over hers to stop her.

"Let me rinse off, and it looks like I need to rinse you off," he said with a chuckle, his knuckle rubbing against her soapy nipple. "Then let's go to bed. We've got all night ahead of us and tomorrow night, as well. There's no need to rush, and when I come, *after* you come two or three times, I want to be inside you."

Oh, mama! Two or three times?

After drying off, Juliana padded into her bedroom and pulled back the covers on the bed. She lit candles around the room and turned off the lamp.

A shaky breath escaped when she felt strong arms slip around her from behind. She slid her hands over his forearms, and leaned back against him as his lips nuzzled under her ear. His body heat permeated

the silk of her robe, and she could feel the stiffness of his erection through the towel wrapped around his hips. Playfully, she wiggled her derriere against him.

“Naughty girl.” Ash slid his hand into her robe, cupped her breast, and gently squeezed it, flicking her nipple.

Turning in his embrace, she stroked the short curls at the nape of his neck and asked, “Have you given any thought to how we’re going to accomplish this tonight? The top of the dresser worked admirably with me back on my elbows, but I won’t be able to do that on a soft surface. I’d like to make love to you in a little comfort.”

“How do you feel? Honestly.”

“My back isn’t twinging right now, and my wrist is good, too. I already changed the bandage on my finger,” she said, holding up the freshly wrapped digit. “If you’re asking if I’m up to it, the answer is yes.”

“Well, it looks like you’re going to have to mount up, cowgirl,” he said with a devilish grin. “And we’ll have to see where we go from there. We do have some other options.”

If he meant different, interesting positions, she was all on board for that. Lawrence’s repertoire had consisted of an all-the-lights-off-missionary position, in which she didn’t get off unless there was a lot of foreplay beforehand and a truly one-sided doggy style, all performed in silence except for a relieved masculine groan at the end. If Lawrence asked if it was good for her, she always lied because she felt like unfulfilling sex was way better than no sex, especially if she had a battery-operated boyfriend and a shower massage to bridge the gaps.

“I lost you there for a few seconds. Where did you go?”

She pressed her cheek against his chest, sorry that he’d noticed her lapse. “I’m sorry, I was thinking...about other times.”

“Forget about him. Whatever he did for you, I can do better.”

“That’s just it. It was all pretty disappointing, Ash.” She drew him to her plush king-size bed. She shrugged the robe from her shoulders

and allowed it to slide to the floor. He followed her as she climbed onto the bed, capturing her lips in a kiss that quickly grew more heated. He released her lips and feathered her hair through his fingertips, looking down at her in the dim lights.

“Well, then prepare to have your mind blown, darlin’. Come here to me.” Beckoning to her, Ash lay down in the center of her bed. “It seems unchivalrous to not make you come at least once lying down in comfort while I taste your sweet pussy again, but I promise to make it up to you,” he said with a sexy grin. “Come closer.”

She straddled his hips and settled over him.

“Come up higher, darlin’. You’re not taking me inside you until you’ve come at least once or twice. Higher, don’t be shy.” She straddled his biceps and chest, looking down at him and wondering what he planned to do. He chuckled and said, “Stay where you are, darlin’. I’ll come to you.” He shimmied down underneath her and wrapped his forearms around her thighs as his mouth lined up with her cunt. *Holy fuck!* He wanted her to sit on his face!

“No, Ash. I have a feeling I’ll be the one coming,” she murmured, her pussy clenching when she felt his hot breath there.

“Just lean on your headboard and relax. That’s all you have to do.”

His arms tightened, and he pulled her resisting thighs down. Juliana yelped when she felt his hot mouth on her pussy lips, wondering if he’d be smothered down there.

“Are you sure about this?” she cried out when his tongue lapped at her slit greedily. His moustache was a ticklish torment.

“Damn, darlin’, sweet and creamy. Hell yes, I’m sure.”

Moaning as his tongue slid into her cunt, Juliana closed her eyes and rested her forearms on the headboard, trying to process the sensations. His breath was hot against her pussy, and soon she was panting and moaning his name.

Ash held her to him and stroked back and forth over her derriere and hips. Her pussy pulsed when he growled ravenously, and she

creamed for him, responding to the primal sound. He suckled rhythmically on her clit, bringing her higher and higher, then backed off slightly right as she was about to go over the edge.

Moaning discontentedly, she could've sworn she heard him chuckle. Her hips undulated as he did it all over again, suckling gently on her clit with his mouth and tongue. This time he was unrelenting, pushing her until the orgasm washed over her, and she cried out euphorically.

He began the assault on her senses again. This time he pushed her even higher, denying her several times until she was in a frenzy. When she couldn't take it anymore and started begging for release, he gripped her hips hard and set to her clit again, tirelessly sucking on that erotic bundle of nerves. He flicked it with his tongue until she finally came with a burning intensity that was so powerful it was almost painful, wailing in absolute rapture. Juliana slumped over him, breathing hard. Beneath her, he stroked languorously, licking up her juices.

When he was done, she lifted up onto her knees, and he slid out from under her and helped her lay down on her side. She snuggled up to him as close as she could while he tenderly stroked her back.

"Ash, that was..."

"Did it feel good?"

"That's like asking someone who lives on the sun if they find it warm there. That was intense and beautiful. Thank you."

"Good, darlin', so I won't have to worry about you pining for dear old Larry while I'm making love to you?"

She giggled as she snuggled up to his chest again, licking playfully at his nipple. "No. There's no comparison. I—um." *Just say it, Juliana.*

"Hmmm?"

"I think you're a very considerate lover." *Chicken.*

"You can tell me anything. Tell me your fantasies, and I'll try to make them come true, darlin'."

Ash had known her only a couple of weeks. He'd probably think she was a flake if she told him she loved him this soon.

Grinning devilishly at him, she sat up and climbed astride his thighs. "Now you're *mine* to toy with." She slid her fingertips over the juncture of his hips and thighs. He groaned, thrusting his hard cock reflexively as her fingertips traced over his hipbones. She stroked his taut abdomen before trailing her fingers through the nest of crisp, tawny hairs around his cock and cupped and caressed his balls. Using her good hand, she gently grasped the base of his heavy erection and lifted it as she moved up higher on his legs, licking her lips.

A sexy smile spread on his handsome face as he guessed her intentions. "You're a sweet, little thing aren't you?"

"You think so?" she asked playfully.

The sight of Ash's thick erection made her mouth water, especially once the pearly drop of pre-cum appeared at the tip. She applied the flat of her tongue to the head and slowly licked it clean, smiling at his heartfelt groan.

"Oh, fu-uck," he moaned when she wet her lips and kissed the head, swirling the tip of her tongue around the sensitive ridge as she allowed the wide head to slip between her lips. His hips surged restlessly beneath her. She slid his cock into her mouth, tonguing him on the way in and sucking him on the way up.

"Yes, darlin'. Oh, damn."

His hands drifted over her parted thighs as she slid her lips up and down over his cock until it bumped the back of her throat. He burrowed his fingers into her dripping wet slit and stroked a digit in and out of her, rubbing her clit with his thumb. She moaned on his cock, and he groaned in response at the vibration.

She mewed plaintively as he slipped two fingers into her wet passage and thrust in time with her movements over his cock, still stroking her clit mercilessly. She felt the orgasm build as she continued to rhythmically suckle his erection, loving every erotic inch

of it. Her pussy muscles tensed around his fingers, and he growled in approval as he thrust harder and faster. She moaned in assent over his cock.

* * * *

“Oh, fuck, darlin’. Come for me.” Pressing his thumb firmly against her clit, Ash gritted his teeth, knowing they’d both come apart any second. Her mouth was heaven, but he wanted her to enjoy this to the fullest before he impaled every long, thick inch into her slippery cunt.

“Stop sucking, darlin’. Let go and just feel it.”

She released him with a pop and wailed in elation as she came hard on his fingers. Her lips were wide open, her face rapturous, and he watched her in awe. Slumping to her side, Juliana closed her eyes and panted hard.

Letting her catch her breath, he stroked her back before reaching for the box of condoms and the lubricant. He gritted his teeth, holding back his release as she trailed her fingers over his twitching cock. It roused her when she heard a foil package open, and she crawled back over him, grinning in sated bliss, stroking his balls while he sheathed his cock. He squeezed lubricant into his hand and stroked it over his cock then slid his fingers over her lips and into her cunt.

Lifting her astride him, he murmured, “Ready to ride, cowgirl?” He palmed her breasts as she rose on her knees, bracing her good hand on his pectorals. He held his cock for her and hissed as her satiny, wet heat slipped around him, tightly engulfing him but denying him immediate entrance once again. He could feel her quiver and tense.

“Slow, darlin’,” he murmured as Juliana settled over him. “Take it slow. I’ve got you.” He stroked her hips as he moved against her in small strokes. Her breathing turned to panting as the head of his cock

slid in a bit further. She flexed her hips as she came down, more of his cock gliding into her satiny heat.

“How is it, Ash?” she whispered, lowering her lips to his and undulating in that position.

He sighed and looked directly into her eyes. “It’s beautiful, darlin’, like heaven. Does it feel all right?” His cock pulsed, and he fought the need to thrust hard as she took a bit more of him.

She grinned sexily and chuckled. “I love how tightly you fill me. You feel so hot. Oh, Ash!” she cried out as he thrust into her gently, seating several more inches inside her. Damn, she felt so good.

“Come here. Rest your arm for a minute,” he whispered, tugging her torso down on to his. Curled to him, her breasts pillowed against him felt nearly as good as her pussy did. “Mmm, I love feeling you lying on me like this. Relax baby and let me in.” She took a breath, and he could feel that she was making an effort to do as he asked.

She shuddered in pleasure as he kissed her forehead and squeezed her to him, careful of her stitches. He withdrew and thrust into her, repeating the slow movement, easing her adjustment to his size. He’d been in a hurry before, but now he took his time, taking her inch by sensual inch, her moisture coating his cock.

Resting her cheek on his chest, Juliana flexed her hips against his, purring as more and more of his cock slid inside. She swirled her hips over his cock in a circular motion, making him growl in pleasure.

“You have no idea how damn good that feels, darlin’.”

As she moved over him, he slid the rest of the way in until he was buried to the root. His cock wanted him to thrust hard, pummel into her silky depths, and erupt in release. That could happen later. Right now, he wanted to savor the moment like he hadn’t earlier, just feel the exquisite pleasure of being so deep inside her. He kissed her throat, grinning as she rose up over him. She looked majestic, seated astride him like that.

“Ash, your cock sends my whole body into orbit. Every time you move, it’s perfection.”

“Why thank you, darlin’. You say the sweetest things.” He chuckled, guiding her hips as she swiveled over him, changing her movements every so often, making his cock thrust against her snug walls in a new way. Her head fell back on her shoulders as the new angle made the head of his cock move against her sweet spot. The pressure in his balls built as her movements became more wanton and forceful. Juliana, making love to him, was a magnificent sight. She was normally so in control, and to see her lose her inhibitions and be a part of her letting go was not something he took lightly.

He felt her pussy pulse, her muscles gripping him tighter. He clenched his jaw, holding on to his release until she’d found her own. He angled his hips to more effectively thrust against her G-spot and simultaneously reached down to thumb her clit. She gasped harshly, and her breathing turned into urgent, high-pitched panting as he felt her pussy milk his cock. Her hips flexed against his and he thrust powerfully inside of her as another orgasm found her.

He gripped her hips hard as the tingling inevitability of his release shot down his spine. His cum burst from him in powerful jets as he roared in relief. He held her to him, thrusting as deeply as he could, his release pulsing in hot streams inside her. He caught her when she collapsed, sated, on top of him, shuddering in ecstasy.

He drew her hair back from her face so that he could caress her pink-tinged cheeks. She looked up at him and smiled blissfully, sifting her fingers through the hair on his chest.

“You feel so good inside me.” She snuggled as close as she could to him and her pussy muscles quivered on his dick with her movements, clasping him in her slick heat.

“I wish I could stay forever. I’m holding you all night.”

Once again, he had the feeling that she’d wanted to say something, but he didn’t want to push her, not now, not after what they’d experienced together. He learned from his mistakes. He lifted her chin with a fingertip and kissed her slowly. “I wish I didn’t have to move, but I need to take off the condom.”

She allowed him to retreat from her snug pussy, albeit reluctantly, and curled on her side. When he returned, he settled down with his head on one of her pillows, getting a faint whiff of her floral scent. She snuggled to him, with her head on his shoulder, settling with her cast on a pillow at his other side.

After a spontaneous yawn, she said, "I apologize now if I bop you with my cast later during my sleep. I hope I don't hurt you."

"You'll do fine, darlin'. If you're concerned, you can turn the other way, and I'll spoon you. I want you to be comfortable."

They stayed that way for a while, talking until she drifted off as he caressed her, running his fingers from her forearm, over her shoulder, up her throat, before stroking back down and starting over again. Even in her sleep, she shuddered in pleasure at his touch, a soft smile on her lips.

He stayed that way for a while, watching her sleep. Her lips were pink-tinged with his kisses, and she felt so warm and tender, curled up to him under the covers and thick comforter together. He didn't want to take a single moment of time they had together for granted.

The thought gave him pause when he thought over how his life had been before he met her. Brand new in the area, he was enjoying his work and making fast friendships amongst some of the ranch hands and enjoying the nightlife and entertainment the area offered.

He hadn't been looking for a permanent relationship when he'd laid eyes on her across the room, but he knew his own mind and knew when he was looking at a good thing. Whether that "good thing" realized it when love was looking her in the face or not was up for debate because she sure seemed to be fighting it hard.

His mom told him when he last spoke with her that if he'd found a good woman, he should fight hard to keep her and treat her like a queen once he had her. *That*, he could do.

Chapter Ten

Ash woke with a groan, the morning sun shining in brightly through the window of her bedroom. His fully erect cock tingled and surged as it was enveloped in slick warmth, and he groaned again when he realized what he felt was her suckling on him.

She released him with a pop, and in a muffled voice, he heard her say, “Good morning. Sleep well?”

“Yeah, but I woke up even better. Damn, darlin’, that feels good.”

The covers rustled and shifted, and she smiled up at him from under the sheets, her hair mussed and her eyes still sleepy-looking. “I woke up and noticed you were already partially awake and hard, so I decided to surprise you.”

“I like your surprises.”

She grinned devilishly at him and then returned to her ministrations. He inhaled sharply as she took him all the way to the back of her throat then suckled on him back and forth, establishing a teasing rhythm. He thrust his hips up to her, his fingers sliding into her shimmering auburn curls.

“Baby, for someone who claims to lack experience, you have great instincts.”

She mewed over his cock in what sounded like gratitude, casting her mesmerizing, blue-eyed gaze his way. Her good hand slid back and forth in concert with her mouth over him, and he tilted his head back, getting caught up in the sensation. Her lips and tongue were velvety sliding over him, and her sucking was positively brutal, pulling on him till he thought he’d spurt, then backing off before starting over again. He cradled the back of her head in the palm of his

hand, trying to establish the rhythm he wanted, but when she giggled and he looked down, the devilment in her eyes said she was having none of it. *Where did this girl learn this stuff? "How to Torture Men 101?"*

"You're killing me!" He groaned loudly. She mewed a negative, "Aww, poor baby" response. Her fingers slid up over his abdomen, tickling his bellybutton then caressing his nipples as she continued suckling him into insanity. He'd contented himself to be slowly tortured for a little longer when she gave him a pitying sound, crouched over him, and went to town. Her momentum increased, and he realized she was having mercy on him, finally.

Ash was barely able to form words. "Darlin', let go. I'm fixing to come!"

His brain froze when she giggled and sucked a little harder. *She fucking giggled and didn't let go!*

"Juliana, you're about to get a surprise if you don't let go!"

She sucked him harder, and he roared as he exploded in her mouth. Stunning him, she swallowed his cum, every searing-hot stream of it jetting into her mouth. She moaned and swallowed it all, sucking and licking him as the pulses slowed and finally stopped.

"Holy fuck!"

When he was able to lift his head, he looked down at her, his cock still filling her mouth, her cheeks a deep pink. Her eyes were closed and she looked...pleased. When her eyelids opened partially, he was blown away by the sexy, dazed contentment he saw there. Finally releasing his cock, Juliana lovingly flicked her little pink tongue against it while she maintained eye contact like she was letting him know she loved his cock and his cum. She smiled at him, licking her lips as she crawled up his torso to lie down on top of him.

Lying there in amazement, he wrapped his arms around her. She lifted her head and leaned down to kiss him and then traced a finger over his sideburn. "Was that all right?" she asked, a hint of uncertainty showing for a second in her eyes.

He chuckled in surprise. "You want to know if it was 'all right'? I want to keep you forever."

She smiled and then tucked her head under his chin. "Really?"

"Yes, darlin'." He gently rolled her over onto her back, careful of her cast and stitches. He braced on his elbow, lying alongside her, and palmed her breast. "You were very generous to do that for me."

"I'm glad you liked what I did. What with all that moaning and groaning, I was worried that I wasn't doing a good job." She snickered then changed her tune, whimpering as he toyed with her tight peak, licking it.

His whiskers brushed against her sensitive flesh as he nibbled it, causing her to yelp softly then moan and arch her back. He suckled again then released it with a wet pop and smiled at her.

"You'd moan and groan if you were being tortured with extreme pleasure, too. How is your back feeling? Are you comfortable?"

"As long as I don't move too much, it feels fine. Why?" she asked with mischief in her eyes.

"Because I think that one good turn deserves another, don't you?"

She glanced at her clock. "Do we have time?"

"It's eight thirty. We have time. I'll make you breakfast while you get ready. Don't worry about it anymore because I have a hankering for your luscious little pussy this morning."

She moaned as he paid meticulous attention to her need.

* * * *

Ash helped Juliana down from the truck at five minutes until ten o'clock. Evelyn gave him what she probably thought was a sneaky thumbs-up as Juliana passed her in the doorway. He obviously had Evelyn wrapped around his finger, judging by the kiss she blew him as he backed the big dually out of the parking space. Juliana was big enough to admit that he could wrap her around whatever body parts

he wanted to as well. Her sated body hummed in testimony of that fact.

“Well, Juliana, you look like you’re feeling much better than you did last night. It’s amazing how a nice, long, restful night of sleep can restore a person,” Evelyn said as they walked together to the back hallway.

Juliana caught the theatric tone of voice and glanced down at her friend, saw the barely-there hint of a smirk, and gasped. “Evelyn!”

“What? I’m merely commenting on the obvious, healthy glow in your cheeks and the twinkle in your eye. Am I to assume he will be picking you up at two o’clock?”

“*On the dot*, he says. I’m to be ready and waiting to go.”

Evelyn gleefully rubbed her hands together. “Oh, I do like him very much, and he’s punctual, too. I’ll make sure you’re ready.”

Juliana tried to bristle. She really did. She did not like to be ordered around or told what to do. But she was already itching for two o’clock to get there. Ash knew how to push all her buttons, but she was coming to understand that he also knew how to push them in a good way, too.

Three times, the words had been on her lips, but she hadn’t spoken them. She would appear flaky, telling him she loved him after so short a period of time, especially on the heels of her breakup with Lawrence. Ash obviously enjoyed their time together, but he’d given no indicator verbally he felt the same way. He was so easygoing it was hard to gauge how he felt about her, beyond the physical attraction between them. But it took more than great sex to build a strong relationship.

They still had the challenges of her job, and even his, to get past. Ash had told her earlier that his responsibilities at the ranch would be increasing as he took over the foreman position from Angel. She had her own difficulties at work to be gotten through as she cut her hours and divided the extra workload with Leah.

Juliana liked the tight ship that she ran, even if it meant she worked some hellacious hours and took on more jobs than she should. Being a perfectionist did not help her current predicament. It was more of a hindrance.

After making her to-do list for the week, Juliana wrote a list for Leah and Evelyn and placed them in their mailboxes, happy with the stretch out of her comfort zone, delegating tasks to the two capable women.

She sat back down at her desk and contemplated what had happened the previous afternoon. Juliana had not needed to worry about contraception for years after Lawrence had his vasectomy. He'd been certain that he wouldn't want kids, and his mother didn't even know she wouldn't be having any grandchildren from him. She grinned thinking she should call her and let that little tidbit slip, just to get even with both of them.

Having unprotected sex was stupid, but she'd been so caught up in the moment, it hadn't even occurred to her. It sounded almost as stupid rattling around in her head as it had the day before when she'd apologized to Ash. He hadn't been upset about it at all and had claimed equal responsibility. She contemplated calling Dr. Guthrie about it.

Juliana was paged to the sales floor, and before she knew it, her busy morning was over, and she was completely immersed in her work. Evelyn kept her on track time-wise, and when two o'clock came near, she had her purse in hand, workweek planned out, and tasks delegated. She smiled when she heard Ash's deep voice from down the hall, talking with Evelyn.

She poked her head out the door, admiring his denim-clad physique. He was once again in his dusty cowboy boots, barn jacket, Western shirt, and black felt cowboy hat, hands on his hips as he shared a laugh with Evelyn. He was stroking thoughtfully through his light-brown muttonchop sideburns, nodding at something Evelyn said.

“What are you two conspiring about now?” Juliana asked as she slipped under the arm he lifted to wrap around her shoulder. She loved the way they fit together so nicely. Lawrence and she had been the same height, so a position like that with her snuggled under his arm would not have been comfortable, not that he was the snuggling type regardless of his height issues.

“Miss Evelyn was just telling me about a new restaurant in Morehead. She thought that we might like it.”

“Oh. Well, I’m ready when you are.”

He helped her into his truck, and they stopped for a late lunch at O’Reilly’s. On the way home, they went by the grocery store for steaks, which Ash planned to grill that evening after she’d napped, he informed her.

Acknowledging that she could do with a little nap that afternoon, Juliana slipped out of her work clothing and put on a loose T-shirt and yoga pants then allowed him to tuck her under a blanket on her bed.

“Are you going to join me?” she asked as she looked up at him sleepily from her pillow. She was not normally a napping person and was surprised by how easily her body yielded to lethargy.

“No. I haven’t had the time or space to enjoy cooking in a while, so I’m going to snoop through your cabinets and concoct some surprises for you this evening. You stay in bed and take a nap.”

She gave him a mini-salute then stuck her tongue out at him before giggling when he swooped down to her for a kiss.

“Sleep. Doctor’s orders.”

Juliana hmped. “Doctor who?”

“Doctor Evelyn. We’d better do as she says.”

“You’re right. Ash, you are such a sweet, thoughtful man.”

Ash stopped in the doorway, the expression in his eyes unreadable in the dimmed room. He leaned lazily against the doorframe, adopting that sexy, loose cowboy stance that made her salivate. Shrugging nonchalantly, he said, “It’s a burden. You’re welcome, darlin’. Rest now.”

She conked out and didn't wake up until three hours later. Evidently, she'd been sleep deprived for a while. A succulent combination of aromas wafted into the room, making her mouth water and her stomach rumble. She smelled smoke from her grill out back, but she also smelled garlic, onions, herbs, and...chocolate.

"If ever I could love, I think it could be with you..." she started to sing to herself, humming the melody to the Keith Urban song as she stretched in bed, careful of the stitches. She hardly felt them when she moved and counted that as a good sign.

Quietly, the door opened, and Ash stuck his head in. "Oh, good, you're awake. Supper will be ready soon. I hope you're hungry. I went to the store and got some things. Your refrigerator and cabinets were practically empty."

"I don't keep a whole lot in the house. I hope you didn't go to major expense."

"You don't worry about that. It was my idea," he said as he sat on the side of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Good. I slept hard, and my stitches aren't bothering me. Is that chocolate that I smell?"

Ash smiled and nodded. "Yes, I made you a surprise for dessert."

"Ooh. Yummy!" She felt so good she might surprise him and make *him* her dessert.

Juliana was blown away by the fare spread on her kitchen counter. Ash grilled thick rib eye steaks in a fragrant marinade. There was a vegetable dish which contained the garlic and onions she'd smelled, plus rice, peppers, and a blend of seasonings she could not identify. There was also a spinach, field greens, and tomato salad with a homemade dressing and grilled homemade bread. She glanced in the kitchen, stoked to see that not only could he cook but he'd also graciously cleaned up after himself.

She peeked under the dish cloth and pinched off a small piece of the grilled bread and moaned. The Keith Urban song began playing in her head again, and she murmured, "You fricking know how to cook,

big man. That bread is delicious!” Her grandmother would say he was a keeper.

“When I was growing up, we had a housekeeper who helped my mom with running the house and cooking. There were eight of us, and Mom had more than she could keep up with between us kids, my dad, and the ranch hands, so Lydia came to live with us. She was raised on the Yucatan peninsula. She’s who taught me how to cook all these dishes.”

“Did you say there were *eight* children in your family?” Juliana asked incredulously.

“Yep. We’re spread out all over the globe right now, so it’s been a couple of years since we were all together. You mentioned a brother a few days ago,” he began as he filled a plate for her. “Do you have other siblings?”

“Yes, I have two brothers and two sisters. I also have lots of cousins. We all lived close together growing up, but I haven’t seen them in a while.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” she began as she took the seat he offered her at the table. “Mainly because of work, since *I’m a workaholic*. But there was also a rift in the family a few years ago when my Grandma Lila passed away.”

“What happened?”

“Our families all jointly owned a restaurant in Tillman. We did as the previous generation had done, growing up in the business, learning to cook, wait tables, clean up, and do prep work. I didn’t particularly enjoy restaurant work, but I enjoyed hanging out with my siblings and cousins, even though most of them were older than me. I was pretty close to my Grandma Lila. She passed away suddenly, one afternoon, in her office at the restaurant. She had a massive heart attack at her desk. After she died, my grandpa started—” She paused over the hitch in her throat.

“Darlin’? If it’s upsetting, you don’t have to talk about it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It just takes me back, you know? My Grandpa Jasper started going downhill pretty quickly. He lost interest in the restaurant, spending more and more time alone. Within a month of my grandma passing, my grandpa died, too. He was too heart sick without her. You could see it in his eyes.”

Ash knelt down and hugged her where she sat, silently brushing the tears from her eyes with his thumbs. Sometimes words weren’t necessary.

“Someday, that’s the kind of love I want.”

“So what happened with the restaurant?”

“My dad and my uncles and my mom and aunts had always managed well while my grandparents were around because they were the unifying force. After they were gone, they began having disagreements. This was about the time I graduated from high school and went off to college, so I wasn’t involved in any of that.

“Finally, they settled Grandma and Grandpa’s estate, and now my dad and several extended family members operate Lila’s. The rest built and operate another restaurant in town, including my mom and several aunts and uncles. Nobody wanted to see Lila’s fall apart because of disagreements or crippled by financial ruin, so they made sure both restaurants were properly manned with cooks and waitstaff. Rather than splitting everything equally, Lila’s pays a dividend to the ones who left twice a year based on the profits. Their investment of time and money over the years stays intact that way.

“I moved away after college because I didn’t enjoy the family business enough to invest my life in it. And although I can cook to beat the band, I don’t get any real enjoyment from it.

“Speaking of which, you obviously enjoy cooking. This looks delicious Ash,” she said enthusiastically as he placed a loaded plate in front of her.

“Thanks, darlin’,” he said, joining her at the table.

“So, that’s probably way more story than you wanted to hear.”

“No, I think it’s high time I heard about your family. Are they all redheaded like you?”

“Oh, no. I’m one of only a few with red hair. Most of them are tall, blond, and thinly built. I take after my Grandma Lila. She had red hair like mine when she was younger and the same blue eyes. Grandpa always said she reminded him of Rita Hayworth. He used to tease her and give her a wolf whistle and do the old hand motion for a woman with a full, hour-glass figure then duck from whatever she’d throw at him. Usually it was a dish towel or apron, but once she went after him with a small iron skillet.”

Ash choked. “Damn! And you take after her?”

She snickered. “Uh-huh! Couldn’t you tell?”

“So, did she get him with the skillet?”

“Oh, no. My grandpa was too charming for it to come to that. She chased him into the offices and slammed the door behind her. All we heard was the skillet hit the floor. When they came out later, she was smiling and so was he.”

“Hot-blooded, huh?” he said speculatively.

“Uh-huh.”

“She must’ve been something.”

“Yeah, I miss her and Grandpa a lot sometimes. It’s been hard on my parents and my aunts and uncles. The last I heard, they still hadn’t taken care of dividing up their personal possessions. With so many people involved, I think everyone is afraid that if they start down that road, there will be more strife, so they’ve been putting it off.”

She stopped talking to eat and praised him for the perfect steak, loving the rice dish. “You’re an excellent cook, I hope you know that.”

“I enjoy it a lot. Not many opportunities to do more of it. I’ve cooked for the guys before, but they seem to prefer the basics. I’m glad you like what I made you. If you’re a good girl and clean your plate, there is a homemade dessert for later.”

“Oh, I’m all about being your good girl.”

“Yeah, sure. Remember who you’re talking to!” he said with a laugh. “I remember you calling my parent’s marital status into question, among other things, on the way to the hospital. After hearing about your grandmother, it’s starting to make more sense, though. So my mother shouldn’t take offense at the insinuations you made about who my father might be?”

“Oh, Lord, don’t you dare tell her about that! I’ll never live that day down, will I?”

“It’s not many women who’ve called me a idiot motherfucker that I’ve hung around long enough to get to know better.”

“Hopefully, that means you’ve forgiven me for that awful tongue lashing.”

Ash grinned at her and looked her in the eye. “Actually, down, dirty insults aside, I thought you were the prettiest, hottest, sexiest thing I’d ever gotten on the wrong side of before. You had such fire in your eyes, at least until you quieted down. That’s when I got worried about you.”

“I was so ashamed of the way I behaved.”

“Darlin’, I could handle the rough edges because I could see the sweetheart underneath.”

“But me screaming at you, at the *top* of my lungs? If you could see anything positive in that, you’ve got better eyes than most.”

“Maybe I do, where you’re concerned. You done?” he asked, reaching for her plate as she nodded. “You know, I’ve been thinking next weekend we ought to go out to The Dancing Pony for a date. I thought you might enjoy going out on Friday or Saturday night.”

“I have work,” she said, uneasily. “That’s going to be a busy weekend.”

“That’s all right. We’ll be busy with the horses, too, though not that late. Just bring a change of clothes, and I can pick you up from the store. If we want to have time together, we’ll have to do it at odd times like after the store closes.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not if you don’t. I didn’t expect you to forsake your job completely, just cut back to a healthier workweek.” He was about to say more when his phone buzzed in his pocket, signaling a text message.

She released him to take care of his business and went into the living room to pick a DVD for the evening’s entertainment. She picked two out and returned to the kitchen.

“Ash, I narrowed it down—”

Ash stood leaning against the counter, looking like he’d just been sucker punched. He was replying to a text when he looked up.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You didn’t, darlin’. Let me finish this and we’ll see what you picked out.” He finished typing and slid his phone closed. He still looked almost queasy as he put the phone in his pocket and went to her.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine. Whatcha got?”

“*Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.”

Ash grinned at her and said, “Quirky taste, darlin’. I’d pick Jessica Rabbit any day.”

“Exactly! All my friends think I’m crazy when they see I own that movie. Lawrence absolutely detested it.”

“Well, then that just strengthens my opinion of it. The man clearly had no taste.”

Ash squeezed her from behind as she giggled and slid the DVD into the player, murmuring seductively, “I’m not *bad*. I’m just *drawn* that way.” Juliana rubbed her fanny against his groin, and Ash gave her a growly rumble as he slid his hands over her hips and nuzzled her throat. She felt his phone buzz in his shirt pocket.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Sorry, darlin’.” Pulling the phone from his pocket, Ash looked at the screen. He grunted discontentedly and said,

“Would you mind if I made a call real quick? Otherwise, I have a feeling my phone will be going off all night.”

“No, go ahead.”

Sitting down on the couch, Juliana realized that she’d given no thought to whether or not they’d gotten the store closed with no problems. It made her feel a little uncomfortable and guilty. She rolled her eyes and sighed when another part of her rebelled at the notion that the store defined her life, who she was. Somehow, she’d become what Doug had been looking for in a manager. She was caught up in it twenty-four-seven as if she were its parent or caregiver.

Unsuccessfully scratching at one of the itchy sutures on her back, she wondered if it wasn’t just more free time, or more flexibility, that she needed. Maybe it was time for a bigger change? Time to simplify? Talking about her family earlier had made her a little homesick. She called a cousin while Ash took care of business out on the back porch.

Ash returned bearing bowls of homemade chocolate crisp topped with vanilla ice cream. She squealed when he handed her the bowl, and he smiled down at her, joining her on the couch.

Juliana noticed as he sat watching the movie with her that he laughed in all the appropriate places, but he was distracted and seemed troubled.

He made no move to hold her or play around, caught up in his own thoughts. The movie ended, and he turned to her. At least the smile on his face for her was genuine. He groaned when his phone vibrated yet again.

“Ash, is everything all right? Did something happen at the ranch?” she asked as he lifted her into his lap, careful of her wrist and stitches.

“An unexpected visitor showed up looking for me, that’s all.” He looked at her as if torn.

“Do you need to go? You’ve been quiet and distracted since your phone call.”

He sat there quietly for a few seconds, looked into her eyes, and kissed her. The look on his face told her she was in for a disappointment.

“I should, darlin’. This is probably not something I can deal with over the phone, and I feel bad for leaving others to handle it. Would you mind?”

Juliana could tell he didn’t look happy about it. Neither was he forthcoming with much information. “Of course not, Ash. I’m disappointed, but I definitely understand. Thank you for taking care of me this weekend.” She kissed him, and his moustache tickled her upper lip, causing a delightful shiver to race up her spine.

He smiled at her and squeezed her. “Why don’t you go get changed, and then I’ll tuck you in for the night?” He helped her rise from his lap and patted her ass.

A few minutes later, she slipped from her bathroom, dressed in her satin and lace nightgown, and he sighed in appreciation. Even though he didn’t have to, he gently lifted her and carried her to her bed. Juliana laid her head against his shoulder, loving the feel of his muscular arms around her. He carefully placed her in the turned down bed and helped her snuggle up under the covers.

“Ash, is there something you need to tell me about, or that I should be worried about?” She searched his eyes in the dim light but could find no hint of what troubled him.

“Nothing for you to worry about *at all*, darlin’. It’s just a situation I need to deal with. You get some rest, and I’ll call you in the morning.” He leaned down and kissed her tenderly. His kiss reassured her and hinted at the plans he’d had for that night and promised of nights to come.

Juliana wished he could’ve stayed, and doubt wormed its way into her heart even as his lips lingered on hers. She hoped he’d be a little more forthcoming in the morning.

After he let himself out of her house, she drifted on the edge of sleep for over an hour, wondering what had happened. Who had

shown up at the ranch? And why did he choose to not tell her who it was?

There could only be one reason he'd withhold that information. It had to be another woman. He'd been distracted, sweet and loving as he usually was, but nonetheless distracted. What thoughts or memories had been in his mind as he stared off a million miles away during the movie? Whoever it was, he'd said it was an unexpected visitor. Perhaps it was a woman from his past. If it had been a male friend, she doubted he would have withheld that information from her.

She sighed heavily, rubbing her brow, reminding herself of the way he looked at her, the way he talked to her, and the way he'd made love to her that morning. He wasn't the type to love 'em and leave 'em, and he'd left reluctantly. If it was someone he'd truly wanted to see, he would've left her house much more eagerly. He'd left tonight like he did not want to go and face whatever was waiting on him.

Finally, she drifted off, but her sleep was far from peaceful, and her dreams were troubling. She woke several times during the night and didn't fall deeply asleep until it was nearly time for her to get up.

When she awoke, she felt bereft of rest and a little cranky. Peevishly, she thought about calling or text messaging Grace to ask her if she knew who it was that Ash had returned to the ranch to see. Pride wouldn't let her. She didn't want to seem desperate, even to her friend.

She vacillated, remembering that Grace had asked her to call, and she decided she would after she got to work. Then she decided against it again because she didn't want to know if it was bad news from Grace. She'd rather hear bad news straight from Ash if it was coming.

Proud of herself for following through on her promise to not go in early, she didn't get to the store until nine-thirty. She should've felt out of sorts for arriving at a time she would normally consider late. When she walked the sales floor and checked the stockroom, she was pleased to discover that everything looked as it should.

The stock had been rotated onto the sales floor properly, and the display racks were all full, neat, and tidy. Employees were already busy getting ready for the day.

After her usual morning meeting with Evelyn and Leah, the day went on without a hitch, almost boring in its quietude. At least it was until the theft detection alarms at the front door went off.

Chapter Eleven

Juliana turned in her chair and watched the front doors on the security monitors behind her desk as a petite blond darted out the door, a leather jacket in her arms, followed swiftly by two male employees.

Just as they were trained to do, they stopped her peaceably, cutting off her escape down the sidewalk. They held up their hands and gestured to her to return to the store. Juliana rolled her eyes, watching as the girl first tried the scared-little-girl tactic, but when it didn't work, quickly switched to flirt as she tried to bargain her way out of returning to the store and certain retribution. She applauded Harry and Joe when they shook their heads and pointed up at the security camera.

"Yeah. Smile, bitch, you're on candid camera."

Harry and Joe escorted the shoplifter back into the store while Juliana called Hank Stinson, the sheriff.

He told her he'd be right over to deal with the girl. Juliana waited in the bed and bath department as they escorted the thief to the back of the store. She looked petulant and angry, mouthing off at a customer who stared in disgust at her.

She's talkative. Great.

Harry and Joe escorted her carefully into Juliana's office. Juliana returned to her desk and took a seat as Evelyn stood in the doorway observing.

Juliana looked quietly at the girl, trying to determine if she'd ever seen her before. She had shoulder-length blonde hair, was petite, and had pink-tinged cheeks and didn't look unkempt or down on her luck.

Curious, Juliana finally asked, "Are you from Divine?"

She received a sullen, monosyllabic reply, "No."

"Are you living on the street and have no way to stay warm?"

Again with the negative reply.

"Did you take the jacket for someone who needs help?"

"No."

"Why did you steal it then?"

No reply.

"Do you have someone you would like me to call for you?"

"Why would you do that?"

"So that someone who cares about you knows where you can be found. That leather jacket sells for four hundred dollars. That's a Class B misdemeanor in Texas. You're going to jail. You'll have a fine to pay, plus Mr. Woodworth will probably pursue civil charges against you. I have security footage that proves you're guilty. Is there someone I can call for you? A relative or friend?"

The girl sat there and glowered at Juliana, and then she teared up and bawled. The girl was incoherent for about five minutes, during which time Juliana, Harry, Joe, and Evelyn had all grown completely weary of her presence. Once the melodrama was over, after having received no encouragement from any of them, Juliana took out a notepad and paper and handed it to the shoplifter.

"Write your name and a phone number down if you'd like me to call someone for you. If not, you'll still get your phone call once you get to the county jail."

The young woman took the pen and pad and jotted down a phone number and her name. Juliana took it from her as Hank walked into the office and proceeded to question her.

Juliana had a strong suspicion that this young woman had stolen the jacket for the kick, for the adrenaline rush, or to act out at someone, or out of boredom. She'd stolen from the wrong store, though, and in the wrong town.

Juliana stepped out of the office, removing her phone from her pocket, and dialed the number that was written on the piece of paper, wondering why the number looked so familiar. Then she stopped in her tracks in the hallway as the line started to ring.

A sweet, gravelly voice came on the line right away. "Hello, darlin'. How's my girl doing?"

Juliana paused for a split second, biting back the words that fought to erupt from her lips.

She turned to look at the girl and caught her eyes as she spoke into her phone, "Hello, honey. I'm doing great, or I was until just a few minutes ago. We've detained a Brenda Sanderson in the store for shoplifting. She gave me your number to call. Could you come up to the store if it's not too much trouble?"

"Shit," he said with a gusty sigh. "You pressing charges against her?" he asked in an even voice.

"I have to. It's non-negotiable with Mr. Woodworth. All shoplifters are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Hank has the security camera footage, and he's talking to her right now."

"Okay. I'm already getting in my truck. I'll be there in five minutes. Darlin'?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry you're in an uncomfortable position. I suspect that inside you're furious."

Juliana looked at Hank and pointed at the phone, verifying that it would be okay to step away from the doorway for a few moments.

"I have to admit that my first reaction was anger when I recognized the phone number. I'll even admit to being a little green-eyed. I kept myself awake all night imagining what could call you away from my place right before bed and could only assume it was an old flame. She's quite manipulative."

Ash scoffed. "That little twit has nothing on a woman like you. She's a buckle bunny from Denver. She's by no means an old flame, but I am sorry to say she is a woman from my past. She tracked me

down through one of my sisters. I set her straight when I got home then found out she hooked up last night with one of the ranch hands back at her bed and breakfast. She moves fast.”

“Was she trying to get even with you?”

“I don’t know, probably just looking for the next thrill. Evidently, tangling with the law was also on her to-do list. She’s a conniving little thing, so I wouldn’t put much store in what she tells you, darlin’. I’ll be at the side door in a few minutes.”

“Okay. See ya.”

She returned to the office, listening to Harry describe what happened. Brenda looked over at her with narrowed eyes.

“Why did you give Ash Peterson’s phone number?”

“Because up until he threw me away last night, evidently for *you*, I was his girlfriend, and he’s the only one I know in town. You’ll see. He’ll find someone else he likes the looks of, and he’ll toss you aside, too, just like that,” she said, snapping her fingers.

“Whatever, sweet cheeks. He’s on his way.”

As Juliana sat listening to them, she cringed inwardly, thinking of what the options were for Brenda when she went before a judge. Jail time, community service, a stiff fine. Jail time and community service meant the little crook would have to stay in the area.

Juliana wondered who this little thief would go to when it came time to pay the fine. Hopefully, she had a rich daddy somewhere. Having seen her in action, Juliana could imagine the ruckus she must’ve stirred up at the ranch last night.

She heard the side door open, and then Ash walked down the hallway, greeting Evelyn as he approached.

Juliana smiled at him but wouldn’t reveal how relieved she was to see him for Brenda’s benefit. She didn’t rise from her chair but simply looked over at Brenda. Brenda looked up at Ash, and her limpid-blue eyes filled with tears, and her little chin quivered dramatically. She hitched a sob, and it was all so damned “*tragic*” all over again as she bawled her eyes out.

Ash looked over at Juliana and rolled his eyes, shrugging. “I called your daddy, Brenda. He’ll fly in to San Antonio and be here late tonight. I don’t know why you called me when he’s the one you’ve got to talk into bailing you out.”

“How did you find out how to contact with my daddy?” she asked, shutting off the waterworks so suddenly it was almost comical.

“I used the same search engine you used to track me down. Some people look up Google, and some people call my sister Donna. Mrs. Warner asked me to tell you that after the stink you made last night, if you set foot on the Divine Creek Ranch again, she’ll meet you with a loaded shotgun.”

Hank and Juliana exchanged a big-eyed look, and Juliana did her best to hide a wide grin. Curiosity got the best of her, and she had to ask. “She pissed off Grace enough to say something like that? What did she do out there?” Juliana didn’t miss the jealous glare Brenda shot her.

“After Brenda was done screaming at me, she tore down the drive in that gigantic, hot-pink dually pickup parked outside and took out all of Grace’s newly planted crape myrtle trees by the ranch house. Grace was fit to be tied.” He looked down at Brenda then frowned, tilting his head in puzzlement. One eyebrow arched, and Ash smirked. “Girl, what is *wrong* with you? Open your jacket and take it off.”

Hank looked at her expectantly. “Little lady, we were going to get to the moment of truth eventually. Open your jacket and purse, too, please.”

Brenda unbuttoned her jacket and a bright pink, crocodile-print handbag fell out. Hank lifted the coordinating wallet that matched the bag from the inside pocket, along with a couple of pieces of silver jewelry from one of the locked counter cases. She must’ve distracted the salesgirl that was covering for Teresa while she was on her honeymoon because Teresa would never have fallen for it. Several other accessories were discovered in the inner pockets of her coat and a couple down her boots as well as several pieces in her purse.

“Miss Sanderson, you’re now looking at Class A misdemeanor charges. I don’t know what you were thinking. But you’d better hope the judge is feeling merciful today and that your daddy’s pockets are deep enough because your fine just went through the roof. It would be a good idea to remove any other stolen merchandise we have not already found on you before I take you down to the jail. You’re going to get searched there, too.”

By now, Brenda’s face was splotchy from crying, and her makeup was ruined. She was no longer as pretty as she had been when they’d first hauled her in and certainly no longer innocent or waif-like in appearance. She cursed a blue streak at Ash as she pulled a long package that contained a beaded necklace from her coat sleeve and a red lace pushup bra from the back waistband of her designer jeans. Ash smiled at Juliana and rolled his eyes again as Brenda continued her tirade at him as if this were his fault.

“We’ll need your truck keys, ma’am. I’m impounding your truck as well, at least until your father shows up. See how things shake out, literally,” Hank muttered as he guided her to stand up from the chair, turned her, and cuffed her hands behind her back, despite her protests and whining.

Hank escorted her out of the office and through the store to the patrol car parked out front.

Any customers who had been in the store when the girl had run out with her hands full of the leather jacket must have stayed, telling any other customers who came in what was going on in the manager’s office.

One little, blue-haired lady said to a friend, “What a *shame* such a nice-looking girl is a thief!”

“That’s right, hang your head. You should be ashamed,” the lady’s friend said. As Brenda Sanderson was walked down the main aisle of the store, everyone seemed to have something to say.

“Off to jail with you, missy!”

“Shame, shame!”

“Oooh! She had a potty mouth! Did you hear all that cussing at poor, sweet Ash?” one other little lady said to her husband.

“We don’t cotton to folks stealing in Divine.”

“I guess she knows now, doesn’t she?”

It probably wasn’t the most politically correct thing to do, but Divine was filled with people who looked after each other. It didn’t happen often, but it made petty thieves think twice about stealing from the local businesses. Stigall’s was not known as an easy mark for small-time criminals.

Ash came to stand beside her, his arms crossed over his chest. They watched Miss Sanderson as she was escorted red faced from the store.

“Her daddy will come and pay her fine and make it right with the judge, escort her home, and then two weeks from now she’ll be off in her big, pink dually again. She’s pulled this before. Spoiled rotten, does it for the thrills, knowing daddy will take care of it if she gets caught.”

“So that means she’s not likely to hang around?” Juliana stood beside him, wishing this was the moment when she could ask for all the details about what had happened the night before, but there were too many listening ears.

“Damn, I hope not! I balled Donna out for telling Brenda where I was and set Donna straight about my status since she obviously hasn’t talked to mom in a while. She says to tell you she’s ‘super sorry.’ Her words, not mine.”

“Where is she?”

“At the moment, she’s in Fairbanks, Alaska. She’s a travel writer, doing a piece on a local winter festival. She loves to travel.”

One of her employees chose that moment to approach Juliana with questions about a work assignment. She answered the question then turned back to Ash, who was waiting quietly.

"I guess I'd better get back to work," he said as she walked with him to the side door. She wrapped her arms around him and snuggled close.

"I wish I'd known last night what I know now. I would've gotten more sleep than I did."

"I knew she was making a fuss already, and I needed to get to the ranch. It was a bad deal all around, but I should've taken the time to give you a few details. I didn't know how bad it was going to get. I'm sorry darlin'. Did she tell you what a rat bastard I am?" he asked with a devilish smile.

"Oh yes, in vivid, Technicolor detail. I thought about telling her what a heinous bitch I am so she would know we were perfect for each other. I don't think she likes me." Juliana didn't think it was possible to care less.

"No, she's not known for her ability to cultivate female friends. I'm sorry she's a part of my past. Men think with their 'small' brains sometimes."

Juliana laughed and gave him a kiss. He left, promising to bring her supper when she told him she'd be there until closing. She noticed that he didn't pass judgment or say anything negative. He just gave her a sexy smile and blew her a kiss.

* * * *

"So, did you get in at *least* a few licks in the smackdown?" Doctor Guthrie asked with a snicker as she came in the exam room door with Juliana's chart.

Juliana gave her a lop-sided grin and said, "Yeah, I gave that glass-topped coffee table what-for right before I crushed it."

"Oooh, ouch! Let's take a look at you."

Emma Guthrie parted her paper gown and examined the long line of sutures on her back. "Well, they did good work. You'll have a light

scar here, but you won't look like Frankenstein or anything. Let me see your finger."

Doctor Guthrie sat on her stool and examined the stitches that sealed the deep cut on her finger, and then she removed a tool from the tray beside the exam table and set to work removing them.

"How are you doing otherwise? Things picking up at Stigall's?"

"Yes, business has rebounded a bit. I haven't had to lay anybody off that didn't earn the privilege."

"Your hours still as long?"

Juliana grinned, relieved that for once she wouldn't get the third degree from her doctor about her work habits.

"No, actually, I started cutting them back this week."

Emma's eyebrows arched in surprised, and she drilled Juliana with her bright green eyes. "Is that so? You? You cut your hours back? What sparked this sudden reformation in your lifestyle?"

"Someone close to me pointed out that I may be a workaholic...and a perfectionist."

"Perish the thought." Emma snarked, "*Who* could inspire such change, I wonder?"

"I've met someone. Actually, I needed to talk to you about that, too."

Emma smiled widely in appreciation, "Someone I know?"

"Ash Peterson? Out at the Divine Creek Ranch?"

Understanding dawned in Emma Guthrie's eyes. "Mmmm, very tall, sandy-brown hair, brilliant turquoise-blue eyes. Yummy muttonchop sideburns and a mustache?"

Juliana nodded, thinking that if Emma had said it with a little more needy admiration in her voice, Juliana might have to take her by the hair.

"That would be the one."

"Merciful heavens, that man is so purty he makes my eyes hurt. Wait, what happened to old...what's his name?" Emma asked, snipping away at the stitches.

“Exactly. The cheating bastard broke up with me and moved back to Vermont to be with his mommy and his other girlfriend.”

“You’re better off without him, Juliana. He had soft, icky hands. Now Ash is a *real* man. I treated him for a sinus infection a while back. He’s got the prettiest eyes. I can definitely picture the two of you together. Does he treat you well? Wait, you don’t even have to answer that. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Like you’d expect a gentleman cowboy would. He puts up with a lot, actually.”

“Want to see about getting on the pill?”

Juliana nodded, and they talked as Emma removed the stitches one at a time then switched to her back and began removing those. She could have allowed her physician’s assistant to do this job, but Emma was one to take the time to care for people and not just push papers.

Emma looked at the X-rays of Juliana’s wrist after she finished applying a light layer of antibiotic ointment to the healing laceration on Juliana’s back and wrapping her finger in gauze and tape. After telling her to come back in five weeks to see about removing the cast, Emma sent her on her way with a prescription for contraceptives and a starter pack.

Juliana looked forward to the weekend with a mixture of anticipation. This would be their first real date as a couple. She was looking forward to dancing with him, but she had a feeling she’d be dead on her feet by the time she was done with work on Saturday. Either way, she wasn’t cancelling their plans. She hoped his plans involved spending the night, as well.

Saturday did prove to be a busy day. The weather cleared up, and everybody came out of hibernation to do some shopping and socializing. Evelyn remarked to Juliana, over their lunches, what a good job Leah was doing with regard to the employees and the store operations.

“She’s gifted at it, just like you, Juliana. May I say,” Evelyn said with a brief pause, “you’ve been looking so much happier? Healthier. You don’t seem like you’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders anymore.”

“You think so?”

“I wonder if the change is not due to a certain charming cowboy. He’s been good for you. I hope you make him a permanent part in your life.”

“Only time will tell. But yeah, he pushed me to reexamine my life. I still want to be up here at eight every morning, but I no longer feel like I have to be here all day, every day. It just got to be a habit.”

“A bad habit. I like seeing you a little more carefree like this. Going out tonight?”

“Planning to.”

“Well, I hope you do. At least you weren’t here terribly early then staying until closing. That’s progress. I saw your little black dress in your office. Going dancing?”

“That’s the plan. The Dancing Pony.”

“You should go see Rosemary and Bernadette at Cheaver’s. Get them to set you up with a pretty Western outfit.”

“I thought about it. Do you think Ash would like it if I did?”

“I think Ash would take you in a burlap sack with dirt on your face. But if you’ll be spending more leisure time with him, you’ll want some new boots and a few tops and jeans, at least. Rosemary and Bernadette will know what you need. When it slows down at noon, why don’t you run over there for a little while? You wouldn’t even have to worry about stopping to eat since we just finished with lunch.”

“Okay. But do you think I should wear the dress tonight?”

“With the black stiletto pumps? Definitely. He’ll love walking in there with you on his arm all dressed up.”

Chapter Twelve

Juliana leaned into the mirror over the lavatory in the women's restroom, refreshing her makeup after changing into her evening clothes. Walking in twenty minutes before, she'd felt a strange mixture of bedraggled and keyed up. She'd sat on the couch in the outer rest area and massaged her legs and feet for a few minutes, which helped a lot, and then she'd gone in to change clothing.

Her normal habit was to wear pantyhose under dresses and skirts, but she wanted to go the extra mile for Ash tonight. Juliana had noticed that as she hooked the garter belt and slipped the stockings up her legs that her fresh lace thong was already a little damp. Smiling, she wondered what Ash would think when he found out what was underneath her little black dress later tonight. *Oh, the possibilities.*

She drew the slinky black dress on and zipped the zipper then slipped on her killer black, patent stiletto heels. The stockings were nude with a hint of sparkling sheen to them, and she thought they accented her legs well. She smiled again, thinking she'd know in a few minutes whether she was right.

After finishing with touching up her makeup, she stopped and assessed herself critically in the full-length mirror. The dress fit her well, accentuating her small waist and hourglass figure. The ultra-high heels made her legs look even longer. She fluffed her hair a little and gathered her work clothing and purse and headed out the door, back down the hallway to lock up her office for the night.

She checked her watch, and her heart pounded a little, knowing that he was probably there already, waiting for her. She could hear the

sounds of employees coming back from the sales floor with their cash register tills and sales receipts.

Juliana slung her evening bag on her shoulder and walked down the hallway to the bookkeeper's office to tell Evelyn goodnight and also to get her opinion on the outfit.

Evelyn clapped her hands as Juliana modeled for them. "He's waiting out front. I let him come in when I locked the front door. You'll knock him dead. Go have lots of fun. Dance a waltz for me and George."

Juliana hugged her and bid her good night. Exiting the hallway, she heard his voice at the front of the store as he visited with someone. As she approached the turn to walk up the main aisle, she noticed several employees were waiting to be let out.

Great, an audience.

Her employees were used to seeing her in no-frills, professional attire.

She could do this.

Damn it, has the main aisle always been this long?

Catwalk, Juliana. You can do this.

She retrieved her key ring from her evening bag as she turned the corner up the aisle, her heart fluttering as the conversation up front suddenly stopped. She grinned to herself and walked up the aisle imagining his internal reaction to her dressed like this. She made her way smoothly down the store aisle as she met Ash's riveted gaze and smiled.

* * * *

Hot. Holy. Hell.

All conversation ceased around him as she walked—no, *sauntered* toward the front door. He'd known she might dress up but hadn't known what to expect. Hell, if she was strutting up the aisle in ratty blue jeans and a T-shirt, he'd still be getting hard.

It was the look in her eyes that did it. She drilled him with those pale, wolf-blue eyes, and he lost track of all other sensory input. Smiling at him as she walked up, Juliana slid her key into the deadbolt lock on the front door then allowed everyone to exit, wishing them a good night.

When the door shut on the blustery breeze outside, she turned to him.

“Hi.”

“Hello, *gorgeous*. You’ve got me a little tongue-tied, darlin’.” He twirled his index finger so she’d show off her outfit to him.

“You like it?” She slowly turned for him, and he groaned when he noted the seam on the back of her stockings.

She’s wearing a g-g-garter belt and stockings.

His dick pummeled at his zipper as he imagined her sliding them on earlier then attaching the garters to what must be a lace edge. He looked into her eyes and saw that she must’ve heard the sound he’d made because her cheeks were a pretty shade of pink now. “Is this all right to go out to The Dancing Pony, Ash? Did I overdress?”

No, but I can’t wait to see what’s under that dress. “You’re perfect, trust me.”

Totally fucking perfect. He took her leather coat from her and held it while she slipped her arms into the black, buttery-soft leather then tied the belt at the waist. “I’ll follow you home, and then you can ride me to the club—I mean ride *with* me to the club. Everybody is supposed to be up there tonight.”

She looked up at him and giggled softly. Stopping her as she reached for the door handle, Ash crushed her to him, pressing his lips to hers in a sultry kiss. She felt so good against his chest, and she must have agreed, judging by her sexy moan.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding the back of her head firmly but gently as his tongue swept through the silky recesses of her mouth. She tasted spicy, like cinnamon. Her hands slid slowly around his waist, holding tightly to him.

Her scent filled his nostrils and made his pulse throb. *Everywhere*. She smelled good, like flowers, shampoo, and woman. His woman. He loosened his grip and looked down at her when she let loose an alluring, earthy-sounding chuckle.

“Is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me, big boy?”

Ash chuckled with her and replied, “Oh, I’m packing all right, and I’m *damned* glad to see you, darlin’. I missed you.” He kissed her again, brushing her lower lips with his in a light caress.

He couldn’t wait to get her on the dance floor. He wished now he’d wrapped his arms around her before he’d helped her with her jacket so that he could feel her supple curves under his hands and against his body.

“Let’s get you out to your car, pretty lady,” he said as he put his arm around her and pushed open the door for her, shielding her from the wind as she locked the deadbolt again from the outside. He ushered her quickly to her car, which was parked near his pickup.

Following her to her house, he turned on his windshield wipers as a light rain began to fall. She locked up her car then took the hand he offered as she came to him.

He smiled at her as he pulled open the passenger door and lifted her into the pickup.

He secretly loved the light squealing sound she made, and the feel of her in his arms. After closing her door, he ran around the front of the pickup and climbed in the driver’s side door.

“Ash? Are you sure I’m not overdressed? I bought some other clothing today, and I could change really quickly. I might fit in better with you. I like you dressed up in your cowboy hat, boots, and jeans,” she said as she plucked at the crease of his freshly pressed navy sleeve. “You look sharp. I could change to...match you.”

Ash smiled up at her as he reached over and rested his hand on her curvaceous thigh.

“Darlin’, I wouldn’t change a thing about you. I’m not at all worried about whether we match. Every bachelor in The Dancing Pony will be drooling all over you, and I’m prouder than hell to have you walk in on my arm and have everyone know that you’re there with me. I think the way you’re dressed is perfect. I especially like you in those damn sexy high heels.”

She blushed for him and kissed him again.

“Is that sleet?” she asked, leaning forward to look at the light rain falling in front of the street lights as he backed out of her driveway.

“I think it is, darlin’. Don’t worry. You’re safe with me.” He patted her thigh and squeezed gently, smiling when she placed her delicate hand over his and held it in place there.

Once they arrived at The Dancing Pony, he was glad they’d left her vehicle at home because she would’ve had to park way out in Timbuktu like he did. After setting the security system, he lifted her from the truck and carried her to the asphalt so she wouldn’t have to walk in the frozen, wet grass in her heels.

His mom would’ve been proud of him for thinking of that. Watching for icy patches, he wrapped his arm around her and escorted her up to the door of The Dancing Pony. After they were inside, he helped her slip off her jacket as they waited for the group in front of them to disperse into the club.

She waved at Rachel Wolf as they got closer. Rachel left her seat beside her husband, Eli, who was working the door, to greet them.

“Hey! I’m so happy you came in, Juliana! Grace told me you and Ash might be coming by tonight! It’s good to see you out of the store.” Rachel gave her and Ash a speculative glance and whispered something to Juliana.

Ash shook hands with Eli and greeted the bouncers before pointing into the club. “Darlin’, Grace is waving frantically at you.”

“She’s probably saving you seats at their table,” Rachel offered in explanation. “You’re dancing with us later, aren’t you, Juliana?”

“Sure!” Juliana replied enthusiastically. “Just let me know. If it’s okay with Ash, that is.”

Ash and Eli exchanged a knowing smirk and bumped fists. “Oh, it’s definitely okay with me. Dance with the girls *all* you want.”

Ash wondered if Juliana knew what “dancing with the girls” meant but hoped he’d find out shortly.

All the admiring looks Juliana received from the single men did not escape Ash’s notice. Several were blatantly ogling her as his hand slid possessively around her hip.

He escorted her through the crowd to the table in the corner by the bar, where Ethan and his crew usually sat. Grace was there, seated in Adam’s lap, with Jack and Ethan on either side of them.

Rosemary and Bernadette from Cheaver’s were there also, flanked by Wesley and Evan Garner. Anyone casually observing might think that the Garner brothers were there with both of the girls. Rosemary had confided to Juliana at the pig roast in November that she was in love with both brothers and they with her. They were planning a getaway beach wedding in the spring.

Grace had saved seats for Juliana and Ash at their table, and there were a few other empty chairs at the row of tables as well, saved for friends who must be out on the dance floor.

A waitress took their drink orders, and Juliana and Grace chatted for a few minutes, getting caught up on the news about the little visits Brenda Sanderson paid to them both.

Grace still had her back up over the obliterated crape myrtles. Ash and the unfortunate ranch hand Brenda had hooked up with did what they could to mollify her by planting replacement trees of the same variety. Juliana smiled up at him appreciatively when Grace told her that part of the story. This was the first she was hearing about it.

“Our Grace, when she’s good and *pissed*, is a sight to see,” Adam said with a quiet laugh as he squeezed her affectionately. “We barely stopped her from chucking a clay flower pot through the back window

of that dually before that little chippie tore out of there. We've got some spirited women around here, huh, Ash?"

Ash couldn't help the wide grin on his face as he remembered the sight of Juliana's beautiful, flushed cheeks and the fire in her eyes as she told him off at Teresa's place a few weeks before.

"Damn straight! I like them just the way they are."

A friend came up to Ash and started a conversation with him while Grace, Juliana, and Adam talked. At first, Ash didn't notice the ranch hand that took that opportunity to slip in and ask Juliana to dance. He turned to look at Juliana just in time to see the son of a bitch give her an admiring onceover as he engaged in flirtatious conversation. Being polite, Grace introduced the ranch hand to Juliana, glancing at Ash with apologetic amusement in her eyes. Rock and a hard place, he figured.

"Juliana, this is one of Jack's cousins, Boone Warner. Boone, this is Juliana Meyer. She's the manager of Stigall's Department Store and my former boss. She's also Ash Peterson's girlfriend. Boone, you've met Ash before, haven't you?"

Surprise and good humor registered in Boone's eyes. "Oh! Yeah, hey, Ash! Good to see you again. She looked like she was about ready for a dance. I thought I might oblige her. Sorry, didn't know she was your girlfriend," he said as his horn-dog gaze shifted back to Juliana, suggesting that perhaps Ash was neglecting her.

Boone knew exactly who she was here with because he'd had a staring contest with him as soon as they'd walked in. He must've been waiting for his opportunity to slip in and flirt with her. Show her other options if she was interested. He'd be willing to bet Boone wasn't the only man here who had noticed the seams up the back of her sexy stockings as they'd walked through the club a few minutes ago.

That thought pissed him off in a thoroughly primitive way, but he took satisfaction in knowing he was the one that would have the great pleasure of easing them off of those satiny thighs later on.

Ash glared silently at Boone for a few seconds until he noticed Grace and Juliana were watching him.

He finally chuckled and held out his hand in greeting. He supposed he couldn't fault the guy. Juliana was irresistible tonight.

"Good to see you, Boone. How're things going at the old home place?"

Boone seemed to relax a bit. Probably relieved Ash wasn't going to punch his face in.

"Good. We're all still working out at the Rockin' C Ranch for now. We're working on the old ranch house, making it livable. Still saving money for breeding stock."

"Well, keep at it. That's a beautiful spread out there. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to dance with this pretty lady if she'll trust her dainty toes to me," Ash said as he offered his hand to Juliana but directed a long gaze at Boone. "Smoke Rings in the Dark" by Gary Allan began to play as he led her to the dance floor.

Boone grinned toothily at Ash and nodded. Ash's look said "back off," and Boone's smile and shrug clearly communicated that Ash couldn't blame a guy for trying.

He helped Juliana from her chair and led her onto the dance floor. She was an excellent partner, fitting her body to his, taking her cues from him and allowing him to lead her. Their bodies fit together well. For a woman, she was above average in height, and he appreciated not having to bend himself into a pretzel to kiss her or whisper in her ear.

Neither was she too Amazonian for his tastes. She was strong and solid with lovely, long, smooth muscles like a woman should have but also possessed luscious curves and hollows that made his mouth water just thinking about sliding his lips over them.

The song ended and another began at a slower tempo. He pressed her a little closer, loving the way her body conformed to his, his thigh sliding sensually between hers as he maneuvered her around the

dance floor to Blake Shelton's "Who Are You When I'm Not Looking."

He nodded at a few friends as they took several turns around the floor. He groaned quietly when she curled to him, slid her hands into his back pockets and laid her cheek on his shoulder, content to let him guide her blindly.

His hand slid down her lower back, coming to rest at the upper swell of her ass, when he caught several men at a table gazing openly at her long legs.

Mine.

Joaquin nodded to Ash as he and Teresa passed them on the dance floor. He'd come to respect all the men of the Divine Creek Ranch as employers but also as friends. He had not known Joaquin as long but could tell he was cut from the same cloth as his brother, Angel, despite his long-ranging reputation as a playboy among the rodeo circuit buckle bunnies.

He appreciated their friendship and trust as he took over duties as ranch foreman so Angel could focus on the equine breeding program at the Divine Creek Ranch.

What he knew of Grace and Teresa made him respect them just as much. It had to be difficult to balance such unusual relationships. He sensed that if they were asked, Grace and Teresa would both insist that they were spoiled beyond belief, and their men made it easy to achieve that balance.

Ash knew he could never exist happily in a sharing relationship like they all did. He was too possessive. Coming into The Pony tonight with Juliana radiant at his side had reinforced that in his mind. He felt an adrenaline surge every time he caught a man staring at Juliana and had the almost undeniable urge to put them all in their places, hard. To let them all know she was his and he damn sure did not share.

It made him feel good that Juliana ignored all the admiring gazes, looking up at him with those hypnotic, sky-blue eyes of hers every so often.

His near constant, semierect state soon turned into a full-blown hard-on when he felt her hips flex against him.

When the song ended, she looked up, her eyes a little dazed and sultry looking. "One more?"

"Of course, darlin'." Ash tried to tame his insistent erection with baseball and football stats, but he was only partially successful. His dick wouldn't be satisfied until it was balls deep inside her hot, slick pussy.

"Darlin', you're a good dance partner."

"Thank you. I had an excellent teacher."

Ash was big enough to admit to a flare of jealousy at the thought of someone else holding her like this. He asked as neutrally as he was able, "Who taught you how to dance so well?"

"My cousin taught me how to dance. His big sisters taught him and told him that a woman wanted a dance partner who could lead *properly*. Not just guide them around in a circle or lead them where *they* wanted to go. They taught him how to take charge of the dance, and by leading his dance partner well, she would learn to trust him no matter how complicated the dance. He, in turn, taught me. He spoiled me, actually, because not many men lead as decisively as I'd like. Then...there's you." His eager cock responded to her husky tone, swelling with pride.

"What about me? Do you think you can trust me and allow me to lead?"

Would she learn to trust him? He didn't think trusting him was her problem. He hadn't offered lots of fancy, poetic words, but he was pretty straightforward about how he felt. There was no permanent commitment between them yet because he sensed she wasn't ready for that. Trusting him wasn't the problem. Trusting herself was.

“Well, if you must know, you’re an even better dance partner than he was. Want to know why?” she whispered as she drew closer. Her soft lips brushed his earlobe.

Ash nodded, and she whispered for his ears only, “My cousin was good, but being my cousin, he never made me yearn to rip our clothes off and let him have his wild and wicked way with me like you do.” The tip of her tongue flicked against his ear, sending a shot of lust straight to his cock.

“Damn, I feel the same way,” he murmured in response. “When you melt against me like this and we move together like we were already connected...mmm.”

“The feeling is totally mutual, being up against your strong, hard body.”

“Are you wet from thinking about it?” he asked as his hand slid down over her ass, sliding his fingers back and forth over one of the straps of her garter belt, grinning when she whimpered softly.

“Uh-huh, since our first set of dances earlier.”

“Good, then I’m not the only one enduring a little bit of torture tonight. When we get home, will you model those high heels and this garter belt for me?”

“Big man, I’ll do whatever you want me to,” she whispered sexily, her lips brushing against his ear before she flicked his earlobe with the tip of her tongue again.

Juliana giggled when she heard his deep, rumbling growl of response, and he couldn’t resist the urge to press her to him, grinding his erection against her abdomen. She looked up at him. “Ash, I want you to know something.”

“What, darlin’?” he asked, looking into her warm, open gaze, his heart thumping at the love and desire he saw plainly there. She rubbed her fingers against the fabric over his chest, and this time she didn’t hesitate.

“It’s high time I told you I—”

Chapter Thirteen

Whatever Juliana would've said to him was cut off abruptly as a couple crashed into her as they whirled around on the dance floor, nearly knocking her down. If he hadn't been holding her so close, she would've been flattened on the slippery floor as her feet were knocked out from under her.

"What the fuck!" the drunken blonde yelled too loudly. "If you ain't going to dance, get off the fucking dance floor, bitch!" The bimbo laughed loudly as her equally drunken dance partner twirled the blonde away.

"Whoa, darlin'. You okay?" Ash asked as he helped her from the edge of the dance floor.

"What the hell was that all about?"

He held her to his side as he helped her back to the table, a little anxious to see if she was all right. The blonde had collided with her pretty hard and ruined their moment.

"You okay? I'm glad I had a hold of you, or she would have flattened you."

"I'm okay," she said, checking her stockings. "No runs, no pain. They surprised me, that's all." He helped her into her seat and they took a little break, sipping from their drinks and chatting with the others.

Adam released Grace from his lap, and Ash saw her blow a kiss to where Ethan now stood in the DJ booth watching their table. Ethan returned the gesture with a smile. Ash had been around long enough to know what that meant. Grace sidled up to Juliana.

"We girls are going to dance. Why don't you come with us?"

Ash schooled his wide grin as Grace led Juliana away from him, back to the dance floor. They were quickly joined by Rachel Wolf, Rosemary Piper, Bernadette Carter, Kathleen Stevens, Corina Scott, and her friends Lisa and Michelle.

Protective as ever, Eli Wolf positioned himself in closer proximity to his wife on the dance floor, just as Ash was currently doing. All the girls were there with someone, and their men must have all been feeling territorial as Trace Adkins's "Ladies Love Country Boys" began to pump through the sound system.

As the newest member of the of "girl's dance" tonight, the girls circled Juliana and began to dance in a group. They all flirted shamelessly with their men as they danced for them.

Some of the guys had not liked this little tradition in the beginning. Ash heard that it nearly incited a riot on a couple of occasions when men who were new to the club thought maybe the girls were available.

*"...Now she's coming home to visit,
holding the hand of a wild-eyed boy
with a farmer's tan..."*

Ash watched as Juliana got into the fun of it when Grace moved to the music with her before turning to her three men who stood together ten feet away from her, watching as she moved for them.

The circle widened a little as Juliana began to boldly grind and moved through the group until she was facing him.

*"...They raised her up a lady,
but there's one thing they couldn't avoid.
Ladies love country boys..."*

He felt a rumbling growl well deep in his chest as her eyes stayed riveted on his, and she slid her hands over her hips, twisting and swaying for him, moving gracefully like she'd done this before.

As the music started to fade, the men moved forward to claim their women, and Ash was no exception. She slipped her fingertips into his palm.

“Now that was fun.” She giggled as he drew her into his embrace.

“No, darlin’, fun would be you dancing like that for me then me stripping all your clothes off and having my way with you. This, right here and now, is torture for your man.”

“Oh,” she said in a breathless, quivery voice, “my man?”

“Yes, darlin’. You know it. *Your* man.”

“I think I like the way that sounds. Do you want to leave now?”

His cock sat up and begged like the pathetic horn dog that it was. “Not on your life, darlin’. I’m not anywhere near done dancing with you. You were beautiful out there.”

“Thank you. You’re pretty handsome yourself in your black cowboy hat. You’re...yummy.”

He drew her to the dance floor as another slow dance started and asked, “I’m ‘yummy’ huh? What’s yummy about me?”

When he looked in the mirror, all he saw was an overgrown redneck. If she was seeing stuff she liked, he wanted to capitalize on it if he could.

She came into his arms. “What’s yummy about you? I don’t know if I should start from the bottom and work my way up, or if I should start at the top and work my way down.” His cock suggested she start at the head and just see where they went from there.

“Mmm, from the top?” he said with a chuckle, enjoying her rosy blush. He looked forward to making her blush even more later.

“Okay, the hat. With your coloring, the black felt hat makes you look intimidating and powerful. Then I look in those gorgeous blue-green eyes beneath the brim and I melt.”

“Oh, I *like* the sound of that, darlin’. Keep going,” he murmured as his lips nuzzled her cheekbone.

“You’re enjoying yourself, aren’t you? Okay, the chest. Honey, this chest is,” she began and then pressed her lips together like maybe she was trying to restrain herself from ripping his shirt open. “It’s immense, so powerful and strong. Those muscles in your arms, umm.

Whoo, is it hot in here, or is it me?” she asked, giggling as she fanned herself a little.

“Oh, you’re very hot, darlin’. Keep going.” He wondered if she had any idea how fucking sexy she looked when she bit her lip like that.

Her hands drifted from his biceps, back to his chest, then down to his abdomen. “Your strong abs and those hips. You know, sometimes I want to nibble on them and...” He groaned when her fingertips strayed to his hip bones. His dick stood up and volunteered to be nibbled.

“And what?”

“Lick them. Yeah, I do.” She emphasized her statement by unconsciously licking her luscious lips.

“Okay, what else?” he asked, feathering his fingertips into the silky hair at the nape of her neck.

“You have the most powerful thighs and calves I’ve ever seen, so muscular, and when you’re wearing those boots and blue jeans, I—um. Oh, it’s just *so* good.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, there—there is something else. You’ll think I’m crazy, but there is something about you that gets me wet *every* time.”

“Wet, huh? Every time? What is it? Whisper it in my ear.” He leaned down a little, expecting her to whisper some compliment about his cock, saving that greedy bastard for last.

“It gets me wet whenever I see you...” she murmured, her voice shaking a little.

“What? Naked?”

“Oh *that* does it, too, but this is something different, something unique.” Her cheeks were glowing bright pink.

“You got me real curious now, darlin’. Don’t keep a man hanging.”

“It’s... your spurs,” she finally blurted.

He stood straight and looked at her incredulously. “My *spurs*? My spurs do that for you?”

“Honest, Ash. Whenever you drop by the store with your spurs still on, I can hear them jingling from a distance, and by the time you get to my office, I’m ready to rip your clothes off. Heart-hammering, pussy-clenching wet, okay?” she finished, her hands gripping his biceps.

“Damn! That is *good* information to have, darlin’. Thank you very much for sharing that little tidbit.”

“Plus your cock is pulse-pounding perfection, just in case you were curious,” she added as she pressed her breasts against his chest and kissed him hotly on the lips.

Ash chuckled. “I’ll tell you, darlin’, you’re good for a man’s self-image.”

“Just telling you the truth, Ash. I love everything about you.”

He looked quickly into her eyes, but she looked away and wrapped her arms around him. He grinned happily and allowed her to hide for a moment.

He pressed his lips to her hair, and she trembled a little in his arms, bracing for a comment from him, he supposed. Like a little girl hiding, she stole a glance at him, blushing when she realized he was watching her. Evidently encouraged by what she saw in his eyes, she smiled at him and relaxed in his embrace again.

“I *love* everything about you, too, darlin’.” He echoed her words back to her, not wanting her to feel pressured to make a declaration of love before she was ready.

He immediately noticed when Juliana stiffened in his arms. “What in the hell is *she* doing here?” The surprise was evident in her tone. He turned to survey the crowded club. He looked toward the door and groaned miserably when he saw who had just walked through the door on the arm of some unknown, probably unsuspecting, cowboy.

“Come on, darlin’. We need to get back to the table, before Grace sees her. I’ll talk to her men. I don’t think they’ve seen Brenda yet.”

* * * *

Juliana watched sympathetically as Grace immediately stiffened and tried to rise from Adam's lap, but he wouldn't allow it. Shaking his head at her, Adam murmured softly to her until she settled again and tipped her forehead against his. Ethan placed a soothing hand on her back, stroking through her wavy curls.

Ethan said, "I've never seen that cowboy before. I'll go visit with them. I wonder why she's back in Divine."

Ethan excused himself, and Juliana watched with curiosity as he approached the couple. A frown registered on Brenda's face the moment she recognized Ethan as he approached them. Then she smiled flirtatiously at him.

"What a conniving little witch!" Juliana muttered as she watched Brenda try to flirt with Grace's husband. Ethan ignored her, shook hands with her date, and spoke to him.

Juliana watched as the young woman looked up at her date innocently. Her expressive face ran the gamut in her attempt to control the situation. Her date looked down at her questioningly. She shook her head and played the sweet and pure card, bluffing expertly.

"Wow, how does a person develop such exquisite talent as a master manipulator?" Juliana murmured as she watched Brenda tear up for her date's benefit.

Ethan shook the cowboy's hand again and spoke a few admonishing words to Brenda before leaving them at the bar ordering drinks. Next he sought out Kendall Warner who was talking with two men who had just come in. Ethan stayed there for a moment, talking with Jack's cousin and shaking the men's hands, and then checked in with the bouncers before returning to his table.

Juliana glanced at Grace, trying to gauge her reaction. She didn't look happy as she turned when Adam whispered in her ear. She nodded and laid her head on his shoulder.

Ethan placed his hand on Grace's shoulder, caressing her. "Her date is new in town. His name is Gil James, and he's working out at the Rockin' C. He met her at O'Reilley's when he was eating lunch with Kendall and the boys. Kendall and his bosses, Chance and Clay Carlisle, said he was a stand-up guy and vouched for him. I explained to Gil what happened at the house and at Stigall's, and you saw how she played it. I told him she could stay as long as she was with him and minded her manners. He seems like a nice guy."

Grace didn't look happy about it, but she seemed to accept what Ethan said. This was Grace's territory, and it was a hard situation.

Juliana shook her head, turning to Ethan. "I'm surprised she returned, Ethan, after the public humiliation she received when Hank escorted her out of the store in handcuffs the other day. I would've thought she'd never show her face in Divine again."

Ethan rubbed his shoulder and nodded thoughtfully. "After what happened last June, I don't trust innocent appearances like I used to. Someone who is innocent proves it with their actions, not with coy, well-placed words and looks. She's back for a reason, and if that's the case, I'd rather have her where I can keep an eye on her. She played it as a simple misunderstanding, but I don't think he bought it."

Grace looked up at Ethan and nodded silently, smiling as Ethan drew her from Adam's lap.

"Come on, Gracie, I need a dance with you."

She let him lead her away to the dance floor. No one could look at Grace when she was with her men and doubt that she was soul-deep in love with them. She snuggled close to him and allowed him to lead her into a dance.

Juliana watched Brenda as she seated herself at Kendall Warner's table. She flirted shamelessly with Gil, probably trying to make up lost ground, but Juliana also observed Brenda watching Ethan on the dance floor with Grace, a sharp, pinched look on her face that she hid quickly. Then Brenda surveyed the crowd until she found Ash where he stood talking with Jack and Adam. Juliana didn't miss the

venomous look Brenda shot her way when she recognized her. Juliana gave her a smirk before turning away to talk with Rosemary and Bernadette.

Juliana disregarded Brenda and her attitude once it was clear she planned to behave herself and not cause any trouble. Juliana danced with Ash until her feet ached and she begged to be set free from her high heels.

Chapter Fourteen

Juliana laughed when Ash lifted her in his arms and carried her to her back door rather than let her walk. He used her sore feet and the unlikely chance that she might slip on ice on the driveway as his excuse to carry her.

“Far be it from me to deny my cowboy anything he wants.” She inserted her key in the lock.

“All this cowboy wants, besides getting you in where it’s warm, is to have you model what’s underneath that pretty little dress you have on,” he said as he strode through the dim house with her still in his arms.

“Give me a minute, and I’ll do that for you.”

He allowed her to slip away, and she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth and her hair. When she returned to her bedroom, she was impressed to find that he’d turned down the bed and lit the candles. He was big and tough, but she loved the considerate, romantic side of him, as well. She was coming to love an awful lot about him.

He was reclining against her headboard, his hat off, his shirt unbuttoned and untucked from his jeans. The golden candlelight flickered, creating dancing shadows on the wall, softly illuminating his chiseled features, chest, and abdomen. She stopped and took in the sight of him. Watching him as his eyes roamed over her, she felt warmed by his gaze.

He sat up and unzipped her dress for her then returned to his position on the bed. She noticed as he reclined again that the bulge at his groin had grown quite large. Stepping back with a seductive grin,

she allowed the dress to slide slowly over her hips and legs and then stepped out of it, watching the tension grow in his features as she did.

Juliana stood for a moment gazing at him, clad in heels, stockings, garter and black lace push up bra and G-string. Ash twirled his finger as he sat up on the side of the bed, and she slowly turned for him, her breath catching when she felt his fingertips trace over her hip, gently squeezing her derriere.

Ash drew her to stand between his spread knees. Her breath left her in a rush when his fingertips slid up the backs of her thighs, gliding under the garter belt to grip each cheek of her ass. He brushed his lips over her abdomen.

She slid her fingers into his thick hair, and he tilted his head back and kissed the underside of her breasts. He held her as though she was precious to him, and it made her heart feel like it was swelling and throbbing.

She was barely aware of it when her bra and her garter belt came loose. His fingers were at the lace tops of her stockings, but she was too caught up in the feel of his lips and his facial hair against the sensitive flesh of her breasts. She moaned in anticipation when she felt his fingertips slide down the cleft of her ass, pulling her G-string aside to run a fingertip through the wet arousal between her thighs.

He lifted his face from her breasts, hooked the waist of her G-string in his fingers, and pulled it off quickly then groaned so deep it inspired orgasmic tremors in her cunt.

“Darlin’.”

He held her hips and looked his fill for a few moments, at her in her high heels and stockings.

As he gazed at her clad that way, with her breasts and mons bare, except for her neat patch of auburn curls, she felt a wave of boldness come over her. She trailed her fingertips over his cheek and reached into the night table drawer and withdrew a condom and the bottle of lubricant.

“I’ve wondered all night, since you asked me to model what was under my dress with my high heels on, if you’d treat me like a piece of fragile china, or if you might fuck me the way a man fucks a woman so she knows she belongs to him.”

As she said it, she turned and sauntered to the end of the plush king-size bed, placing the two items on the bed beside her. His eyes were riveted as she placed one hand then the other on the mattress then placed both knees spread wide apart on the end of the bed and knelt there in a sitting position until he rose and came around to her.

He bent down to kiss her as she leaned back and rested her head against his bulky shoulder, looking up at him as he fondled each breast with his work-roughened hands.

“You know what you’re asking for, darlin’?”

“To be fucked hard? Yes. I do.”

“Your wrist?”

“Healing fine. I can take whatever you can dish out, cowboy.”

“We’ll see.”

He thought she couldn’t handle his rough edges? She loved a challenge. Juliana could handle rough with him because she knew he’d never take it too far and would stop at the first word from her. She trusted him.

“Why don’t you break me in gently. We’ll see where we end up.”

She leaned forward and slid her forearms over the quilt, baring herself to him until she was resting on her elbows, the weight completely off her injured wrist.

He stood behind her for endless seconds as she took her time getting into position, smiling at what must be going through his mind as he watched her, dressed only in her stockings and high heels, her ass tilted up to him.

When she was in the perfect spot, she then lowered her shoulders and cheek to the quilt. She arched her back in blatant invitation, her breath stuttering when she felt her pussy lips part with the action, making herself completely vulnerable for him.

Her thighs were already damp, and he could probably see her juices coating her pussy, which was clenching in needy contractions.

Moaning at the feel of his hand on her ass as it slid down to her slick pussy, she watched over her shoulder as he quickly shed his clothes, dropping them all around him in his haste. Her heart hammered as she heard the foil wrapper tear and the bottle of lubricant pop open. Ash groaned as he spread lubricant over his cock. "You've got me so hot, darlin'. I'm not going to be gentle with you at all."

She bit her lip as his declaration caused more moisture to rush to her clenching pussy.

"Damn, darlin'." His tongue suddenly made gluttonous contact with her cunt. "That's *exactly* what you want, isn't it? Want me to fuck you hard?"

"Yes!" she pleaded, an edge of desperation in her voice as she felt another spasm and wondered if she wasn't experiencing a mini orgasm every time he opened his mouth. His tongue and lips played with her for a minute until she begged. He teased more juice from her, making her buck against his mouth, his mustache prickling and making her pussy even more sensitive.

"Want me to fill you full of my cock?"

"Yes, Ash, please!" she begged, wiggling her ass at him.

"Mmm, I love to lick this pussy. Know what I love even more?" he asked, sounding like he now stood behind her. She gasped harshly at the sudden presence of his thick cock at her clenching opening.

"Oh, baby, what?" She cried out as the tremors started deep in her cunt and vibrated outward to her lips, trying to grip him and draw him in.

He groaned loudly as though he felt her reaction to him. "I love fucking this pussy, darlin'." He grasped her roughly and whipped his hips hard, slamming home in one hard stroke. She howled as her pussy spasmed wildly in orgasm around him. She tried to move on him, but he managed to hold her still. Her pussy quaked around his

cock and the sensation of being dominated and held so she couldn't get free made her struggle against him harder and come again, screaming in rapture.

"Stop moving! You're so fucking tight. I don't want to lose it yet." He held her firmly until she calmed a little. Taking a few deep breaths, he loosened his grip a bit. His hands slid around her waist, stroking her abdomen as he pumped deep, grinding strokes into her. The storm built powerfully inside her again.

"You feel so good. I need you so much, honey. Don't stop. I want it all."

"Trust me?" he whispered roughly, his voice strained with his exertion.

"You know I do!"

His cock still pounded in hard strokes into her slick cunt as his fingers slid through her juices then to her asshole. She arched and cried out, her hair fluttering around her as she moved against him.

"Easy. Not going to hurt you."

"You didn't scare me. You surprised me."

The sensation of his callused fingers against the nerve-ending rich opening nearly sent her through the roof. She moaned when his light touch became a masterful stroke, and her body relaxed, his finger finally sliding in with a burning, naughty sense of intrusion.

"I promise I won't hurt you, darlin', but if you want me to give you everything, that's going to include my cock in your sweet, snug little ass. Think you can handle that?"

She couldn't think because he started pumping his finger into her ass with the same rhythm he used with his cock inside her pussy. There was no thinking, only feeling, at the moment.

"I'd make it good for you, if you'd trust me."

"I'd love it. You're so good to me."

"How does it feel to have something stuck in your ass while I fuck your pussy?"

“Oooh! It feels like I’m being bad!” She moaned then suddenly giggled. “Like I’m being a very naughty, bad girl.”

“Oh, no. You’re a good girl, darlin’. Especially when you flaunted that beautiful ass and those long legs, offering yourself so perfectly to me. I thought I would explode just watching you get in position, and then you tilted this gorgeous little pussy up to me to take however I wanted.”

His finger twisted and stroked inside her then pulled out. She felt a few drops of the lubricant fall on her quivering asshole, and then his fingers were back.

He gripped her thigh with one hand and, using two fingers this time, pressed for entrance into her ass again. Ash pressed gently but persistently and slid into her burning asshole, slowly picking up the pace of his thrusting into her pussy.

She cried out at the pinching sensation as he breached the inner resistance with two fingers and then moaned at the arousal that flooded through her bottom, joining with the intense pleasure his stroking was creating in her pussy until it all blended together.

Her body convulsed under his, and her orgasm slammed into her with blinding intensity. She rode each wave until her world narrowed down to nothing more than the sensation of his cock thrusting in hard, pounding strokes along with his fingers.

Finally, he stiffened and roared his own release, and she could feel the twitching of his cock as his cum poured out in hot streams. He grasped her firmly, breathing hard even after the last pulse of his orgasm had faded.

Eventually, his grip loosened, and he traced his fingertips lightly over her back and hips until he finally groaned and withdrew from her, sounding reluctant to do so. Whispering quietly to her, he helped her up into the bed and under the covers. The room had grown a little chilly, and she looked up at him drowsily as he tucked the covers around her.

“Won’t you stay, Ash?”

“If that’s what you’d like, darlin’. But I’ll have to get up early. I’ll go clean up and be right back.”

She did her best to stay awake but was barely aware by the time he returned to the bed, pulling her to him, with her back against his chest.

* * * *

Ash stroked her cheek and her temple, smiling as she drifted to sleep. The candles had all gone out, and he should have been asleep an hour ago. Instead he was wide awake, watching her. Moonlight filtered in through her windows, illuminating her skin, making her appear even more fragile and beautiful.

Breathing deep, he remembered how she’d lowered her shoulders to the bed in submission, something he was sure didn’t come naturally to her. She’d tipped her ass up so he could clearly see her little pussy, glistening in the candlelight. Her hips had undulated, and more of her juices had flowed for him, a treat he’d been unable to resist. Her quivering pussy had been luscious like the flesh of a ripe peach. He’d plundered her, pushed her hard, and she’d trusted him. It was that trust that now kept him awake.

He loved her. He’d probably fallen in love with her Christmas night, impressed with her fierce loyalty to a man who had not earned it. She’d stood up to him and told him off, even though he’d only wanted what was best for her.

He loved the fire in her eyes and the way she cared about her friends and her family at the store. Juliana was an others-centered kind of person, sometimes to her detriment. He had noticed a shift in her recently. Juliana didn’t talk as much about the store and its workings and seemed to have relaxed some.

He whispered as he stroked her cheek, “You’re everything in this world to me, darlin’. You take your time, but I hope you come to love me as much as I love you.”

Nestling his head behind hers, Ash pressed his lips to the back of her neck so that he could sleep with her womanly fragrance filling his senses and drifted off, curled around her.

Chapter Fifteen

The rest of January and the beginning of February passed in a blur for Juliana. Between after-Christmas chores and promotions and preparing for inventory, she had not been able to further reduce her hours.

Leah persisted in doing away with the commission sales. Doug had finally taken the matter into hand and made the decision for Juliana as was his right, since he owned the store. Then he'd announced it at a morning meeting to the whole store. Juliana had felt sick the entire time, watching her employees' faces as they reacted to that news.

He'd tried to sweeten any negative feelings by giving raises where appropriate and increasing other benefits here and there. That didn't make it any better for the employees like Teresa, who, until recently, had needed the commissions in order to survive. Juliana was certain Doug had just cost her the store's best floater. Teresa now had no reason to stay.

Changing the pay structure had soured her on working for the Woodworths, even though she knew they were good people. Doug had intimated that he had other changes in the works that included her but hadn't offered any details. She grew weary of the way he hinted but was never more forthcoming about his plans and where she fit into them.

Thinking about it made her feel exhausted all the time.

Ash regularly stopped in with lunch or sometimes brought her flowers. He defined stability in her life. The sound of his voice when she was stressed about work was all it took to ease her. And the sound

of his spurs jingling as he walked through the store never failed to make her heart jump and her body to respond in excitement. Valentine's Day was just such a day. Juliana stood in the open stock room doors talking with Leah when her ears pinpointed a telltale, metallic jingle.

"What is that sound?" Leah asked, turning to look in the stockroom and then scanning the sales floor.

That, dear heart, is the sound of guaranteed heart-stopping, pussy-pounding sex headed my way. How fortuitous that she was leaving for the day in less than five minutes. Ash had promised her a special Valentine surprise and had asked her to take the evening off. He turned the corner, sauntering toward her, bearing a bouquet of cheerful white daisies.

"Well, boss, enjoy your Valentine's evening." With a heartfelt sigh, she added, "I sure hope there's another one like him somewhere out there for me."

"Ah, you're young, Leah. Give it some time, and your knight in shining armor will make his appearance." Juliana watched happily as Ash sauntered up to them. He nodded politely at Leah and held the bouquet out to Juliana.

"Hello, darlin'"

"Hello, honey. These are beautiful," she murmured as Ash leaned forward to kiss her cheek and handed her the bouquet.

"I'd have handpicked some wildflowers for you, but it's too early for them."

Admiring the cheerful bouquet, Juliana said, "I'll hold you to that in April. Leah, unless you need me for something else, I'm out of here."

"Have fun, boss."

Ash walked her out to her car and followed her home. She put the flowers in a water-filled vase and changed clothes as he requested. Coming out of her bedroom clad in jeans and her boots, she said,

“Okay, *Mister ‘Man with the Plan.’* What do you have up your sleeve?”

Ash smiled and pulled her to him. “I thought you’d like a picnic at Bowie Lake. The weather is perfect for it. From there you’ll just have to wait and see what happens.” The twinkle in his bright, blue-green eyes told her that his “wait and see” would be worth the wait.

Once they arrived, she helped him spread a blanket and they unpacked the picnic basket he’d brought. They sat on a spot that looked out over the lake, and ate as they watched the sunset. Conversation was minimal as the sky changed colors, and after they were finished eating, he pulled her back against his chest. She laid there enjoying the sound of the breeze blowing and the birds calling to each other. Ash stroked her with a touch that was almost hypnotic. It startled her slightly when she felt a metallic coolness against her neck.

“What—”

“Happy Valentine’s, darlin’.”

Lifting the gold pendant that rested at the hollow of her throat to look at it, she gasped in surprise. The heart-shaped pendant was encrusted with sparkling diamonds.

“Ash!” She sat up so she could look at him. He smiled up at her from his reclined position.

“Want me to put it on you?”

“Yes! It’s beautiful.”

After the gold chain was fastened around her neck, she threw herself at Ash, drawing a chuckle from him. She climbed on top of him and peppered his face with kisses.

“So this means you liked it, I guess.”

“I do. I love it.”

He reached out and captured her face in his hands and she stopped what she was doing to gaze into his eyes.

“Juliana.”

“Ash?”

"I love you." Juliana's lips popped open in surprise. She was about to speak, when he placed his fingers over her lips. "Before you say anything else, I want you to know something. I love you, but I don't want you to say it back until you're sure. Don't say it because you think I want to hear it right now." She would have said it right then, but he changed the subject. "While we have a little light left, why don't we load up and move on to the next Valentine's Day surprise?"

"There's more?"

"Yup."

She grilled him once they were in the truck, but he just chortled and told her to wait and see.

Following Bowie Lake road around until they arrived at a turn-off, he drove down the driveway until they pulled up to a small log cabin that sat on a low cliff, overlooking the water. He walked her to the front door and opened it for her. Warm light flooded the cabin, and she detected the scent of a fragrant wood burning in the fireplace.

"How did you do all this?"

"I know some people."

She stepped in and looked around the small structure. It was probably once a weekend home and someone had renovated and updated it into a romantic little getaway, perfect for two people in love. There was a large, stone fireplace on one wall and a cozy, little, tiled kitchen in one corner. The enormous bed sat against the wall opposite the fireplace, under an imposing wrought-iron canopy which was festooned with gauzy drapes. Plush, upholstered chairs sat beside the fireplace. A small butcher block table occupied another corner and a doorway led to what looked like a bathroom. The floors were hardwood with festive, colorful rugs scattered about.

"Get naked, darlin'."

Ash's voice was deep and rumbling, making her heart do the jitterbug in her chest, but she started stripping as fast as she could. She recognized her overnight case and her makeup bag on a bench

near the bed and glanced at him in surprise. He'd planned this out thoroughly because if they were spending the night, she'd need her stuff.

"Oh, shoot." That brought her responsibilities to her mind.

"Nope. You have no worries. I already cleared your morning off with Evelyn."

"You did?"

"Yes. She said you had your planning session this morning, and they don't expect to see you until one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. So you're all mine until then."

She wanted to be *all his* way beyond just one o'clock tomorrow.

"Ash, I don't know what to say." If he'd done this a month ago, she'd have gotten mad at him for disrupting her schedule and not asking her first. Now she was just grateful that he'd thought of it, and she wasn't worried about the store at all.

"How about, '*Here, Ash, let me finish getting nekkid*'?"

Juliana giggled and went back to stripping. He removed most of his clothes as well and went into the bathroom. She followed and squealed in delight when she saw the positively huge bathtub. Much like the bed, it was so big three people could fit in it easily. Ash turned the faucet handle and set the water to the right temperature then threw in a small amount of bath salts. The herbal scent of lavender filled the room.

"I thought you might like a relaxing soak in the tub before I make love to you."

"Oh, you thought right, handsome. This tub is like something from my fantasies. Whose cabin is this?"

"Belongs to a good friend who's out of town right now."

The tub filled quickly, and he helped her climb in after she pinned up her hair with the clip she found in her overnight bag and he'd wrapped her wrist. The genius had thought of everything. Settling in the water, she smiled up at him. The lethargy left her limbs as she noticed the throbbing erection jutting from his groin as he slipped off

his snug boxer briefs. The hot water felt stimulating, but it was nothing compared to the heat that leaked from her cunt at the sight of him, needy and turned on, watching her.

He joined her in the tub and lifted her onto his lap so she sat straddling his hips.

She cupped her good hand and lifted water to sprinkle on his broad shoulders and chest. "So, what do you have planned?"

The slow, sexy smile that spread across his lips made her body hum in anticipation as he contemplated his words.

"Well, the first item on my agenda is making love to you in this ridiculously enormous tub." As he said it, his cock pulsed against her clit where it was pressed intimately to her, and more heat rushed to her pussy.

"Ooh, yes," she whispered.

"I'll help you from the tub and dry you off. Then, since the weather is so nice, I'm going to carry you out onto the back deck and lay you down on the chaise that's out there. You're going to finger your pretty little pussy for me and show me just how you like to be touched, and then I'm going to make love to you again. We'll rest for a while and enjoy looking up at the stars."

That sounded nice. She'd never made love outside, and if they remembered to bring a couple of blankets, they might even be able to stay out there a while and be very comfortable. Ash's cock pulsed against her again as he continued.

"Then I'm going to introduce you to a special piece of furniture that's also out there. You'll get comfortable on it, and then I'm going to slide every solid inch of my cock into your snug little asshole."

Juliana inhaled suddenly, and her cunt locked down at the mental image he painted as though she was about to have a spontaneous orgasm. "Oh! Really?"

"Yes, *if* you want it. The loveseat out there will be perfect. There won't be any pressure on your wrist. You'll feel secure on it and be

able to relax. *If* you want it. This has to be something you want as well.”

“Oh, honey. I want it like people in hell want ice water.”

“Good, darlin. Thanks for trusting me.”

Juliana tightened her arms around his neck and kissed him tenderly, stroking his tongue and sucking on his lower lip as she lifted and slowly gloved every inch of his thick erection. The water was hot, but his cock inside her was hotter.

Ash lifted his knees slightly so that she could sit in his lap with his cock deeply buried inside of her.

“Lean back just a bit, darlin’. Got something for your sweet little clit, if you feel like playing a bit.”

“Oh, I’m feeling it, all right,” she said with a chortle as she complied. He reached over the edge of the tub and removed a long, cylindrical object from the table nearby. A vibrator, from the looks of it. Ash must’ve gone shopping. “Oh, boy.”

“I thought you’d like this.” One end of it was broader and shaped like the bowl of a teaspoon. “Hold still as long as you can. Hands on my shoulders.”

He switched it on as his cock twitched inside her pussy, and she felt herself liquefy around him. The vibrator had a very high-pitched whirring sound, and Juliana had a feeling she would come the moment it touched her.

“I like the way you play, cowboy.” *Love you, love you, love yooooou!*

Her pussy convulsed the instant the high speed vibrations touched her clit through the soft jelly of the toy.

“Oh, God!” She threw her head back, barely aware of his hand at her upper thigh, holding her still on his cock. He stroked up and down with the toy under the water, and she couldn’t help it as she began to thrash against his hold, trying to move on his cock. Her pussy drew up around him like a fist, and he roared as she came suddenly,

broadsided by the intensity of the explosion, pulling him into simultaneous orgasm.

“Holy shit!”

Juliana screamed as she ground against him, water splashing around them. Ash wound his arms around her and held her tightly as he thrust hard against her, dropping the vibrator in the water. As she caught her breath, she felt like her body was one gigantic pulse she throbbed so hard.

“Ash, that was one hell of a good investment.” Juliana went limp on him, and they stayed that way for a while. She’d been on the pill long enough that they no longer needed the condoms, and she loved being skin on skin with this big man. She looked into his eyes as he opened them and smiled up at her. Words weren’t necessary as she laid her head on his damp shoulder and snuggled against him. He gave a satisfied-sounding, growly rumble and held her securely.

* * * *

After the bath, Ash removed the wrapping from her cast and was amazed it was still dry after their thrashing about in the tub. He did as he said and helped Juliana dry off, patting the diamond necklace carefully with the towel as she gazed up at him, her heart in her eyes. He lifted her in his arms and carried her out the French doors that led onto the moonlit back deck. Sighing in appreciation, she looked up at the stars festooning the night sky.

He lifted a blanket from a low stack located next to the wide outdoor chaise, which was opened up and laid flat for them. The moon provided just enough light for him to watch her as she stepped naked to the deck railing and looked out over the thickly treed landscape that surrounded them. She looked peaceful and lovely standing there, the moonlight turning her skin to alabaster. No houses were close-by, but he could hear soft music somewhere in the

distance. Ash opened the blanket and laid it on the chaise then helped her onto it.

His dick throbbed to be inside her, unmindful of the fact that he'd just had a release. This is how it was for him, morning, noon, and night. He wanted her always. Lust rushed through him, culminating in his rutting cock as she laid back and smiled seductively, fingering her pussy. He could clearly hear the wet sounds her fingers made sliding through her slippery, swollen lips as well as her soft gasps as she stroked her clit.

"I love watching you while you stroke yourself, darlin. It's beautiful. You're beautiful, all of you. Stroke your clit. Those little cries are like music to me."

His cock pulsed as he stood there watching her. When her back arched and she drew her knees up, moaning in ecstasy, he could take the torment no more. He crawled between her legs, lifted her hips, and impaled her with one swift stroke.

"Yes, like that, Ash. *Just like that*. Fuck me hard."

Fuck her hard, he did. He pounded into her slick little cunt as her panting cries grew more intense. She wrapped her strong legs around his hips and urged him on, speaking sweet, dirty words to him. Juliana bowed her back from the chaise and froze, her pussy gripping his cock with rhythmic strokes as she came undone for him, panting and sobbing quietly, pulling him into orgasm with her. He appreciated that she was trying to be unobtrusive, but he planned to hear her scream at least once before they slept. He didn't care who heard them.

He lowered himself so that he was on top of her then gripped her ass and rolled them so that he was now on his back, his dick still deep inside her, just the way he wanted it. He reached for another blanket and covered their connected bodies with it.

Ash caressed her as she dozed. A birdcall startled her, and she looked up at him. "I'm sorry."

"Go ahead, darlin'. Rest for a while."

"But we—

“We have plenty of time, and I don’t want to rush the evening. Rest on me for now. I’ll take your sweet, little virgin ass after you’ve had a rest.”

Her body trembled against his, and he felt the convulsion all the way to her cunt as she flooded for his cock again. Damn, he loved how responsive this woman was. He took a deep breath and let it out, holding still to give her a chance to rest, but his cock hardened inside her slowly until he couldn’t resist the urge to thrust anymore than he could deny the urge to breathe. Her pussy tightened in response, and she lifted her head from his chest.

“I can’t stay still anymore. I need you, Ash. Show me what to do.”

* * * *

Juliana allowed Ash to help her onto the loveseat. That was what he called it, but it didn’t look like any loveseat she’d ever seen before. There was a cushioned place for her knees as well as for each of his knees, both between hers and also on the outside so he had options and leverage, she supposed.

Ash caressed her back and her hips as she settled into the dips and curves of the oddly shaped seat. When she settled her hips over the cushion and relaxed against it, she noticed that the angle tilted her hips so that she was wide open for him. That reality made her body pulse with need. Her entire torso was supported by a contoured cushion that yielded to her body shape. There was even a place to rest her cheek or her chin at a comfortable angle. Her arms rested in two depressions slightly above her shoulders, with dips to rest her hands in or rounded mounds for her to hold on to for leverage, if she were to hazard a guess.

“How does it feel?” Ash asked as he caressed her vulnerable ass.

“It’s very comfortable. Soft. I can understand why it would be perfect for anal sex. I do feel relaxed.”

“Good, darlin’, because that’s how I want you. Ready for me?”

Juliana moaned in assent as he slid his fingertips into her dripping wet slit, stroked her clit teasingly, then slid them back to her asshole.

“Oh. Oh, yes, Ash.”

“I’m going to prepare your ass for my cock, so that I don’t hurt you. I’m going stretch you a little, and get you accustomed to the feel of something entering you there. Relax for me.”

She nodded because she was incapable of speech at the moment. His slippery fingertips massaged her anus in a gentle but persistent inward motion. The muscles in her ass wanted to resist, but she didn’t fight him. Appreciating the comfort of her current erotic position, she relaxed her neck, her arms, and her legs, focusing on giving him what he was asking for. Her pussy wanted to tighten up, but she maintained her position and relaxed her legs and ass.

Ash applied lubricant to her asshole and repeated the process as her body began to tingle in pleasure. She pushed back a tiny bit as he pressed inward and one finger entered easily. It burned, felt naughty and wonderful at the same time. He withdrew, circled two digits, and pressed inward. She acquiesced and allowed him inside her and felt the increased burn of two fingers.

“Okay, darlin’?”

“Uh-huh. Ash, I love it. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, darlin’. I’ll go slowly for you, I promise.”

“Mmm-hmm. So good.”

Ash slid his fingers deeper, twisting and scissoring them, thrusting them in and out until she began to rock with him, against him. She could feel her pussy flooding and pulsing, wanting to be filled, too. He withdrew and applied more lubricant to her opening, and the area around it. It sounded like he also applied some to his cock, as well.

“Ready, darlin’?”

“I think so, yes.” Her asshole and pussy quivered as she felt the tip of his cock at her anus. *Relax for him. Let him in. Give him everything you have.*

She exhaled and let go as she felt the burning intrusion of his cock against her anus. His hands were incredibly gentle on her hips as he pressed against her. His breathing sounded shallow, like he was panting with exertion. She wondered how it felt to him, how she looked, laid bare, giving him this part of herself.

“Easy, darlin’. Here it comes,” he murmured as she felt the muscles begin to really burn and give way to him. He was holding her hips so it must have been his thumbs she felt press near either side of her asshole, getting her to give that last little bit. Suddenly, he was in. Her ass burned, but it was an erotic, impatient sort of burn. He stroked her asshole around his cock, and the fire began to diminish as he held still, giving her time to stretch and accommodate him.

“A–Ash, how am I doing? Are we okay?”

“Yeah, darlin’. I don’t want to rush this and hurt you. Damn, you feel so good. It’s unbelievable.” He released her hips and glided his hands over her back and down her thighs in long, sweeping caresses that made her skin tingle. She could feel her cunt pulse and smiled as her body sought to establish a rhythm on its own. She pressed back just a bit against Ash’s cock, and it slid in further, and he groaned.

“You take my cock so sweetly. You doing okay?”

“Yes, can I do it again?”

“Yes, again.”

Juliana pushed back against him, and more of his solid, hot cock entered her ass. She wished she could see and imagined they looked hotter than hell together. He groaned and took hold of her hips as more of his cock worked into her ass. She felt the echo of an impending orgasm as he slid to the root and his hips pressed against her.

“All of it?” she asked with a shaky sigh.

“All inside your lovely ass.”

“I’m on fire, Ash. I’ll come soon, and I want you to come with me.”

“I’m going to stroke your pussy with the vibrator, too, darlin’. Would you like that?”

Would I like that? Would I like that? I may die! She laughed throatily and said, “If you must.”

Ash chuckled and turned on the vibrator from the bathtub and swore softly as her pussy and ass both clenched in anticipation at the sound. *Hot freaking hell, I’m gonna scream for sure!*

“I can’t hold back anymore. Brace yourself, darlin’.”

She cupped her hands over the mounds provided for them. His cock slid out over delicate, nerve-rich tissues and then back in. The bite of pain was erotic and intense as it was overcome by the pleasure that grew with each stroke. The soft jelly of the vibe stroked her pussy lightly as he zeroed in on her clit. His strokes became more assertive and demanding, and she was vaguely aware of begging for more as her body vibrated and quivered, and she rocketed to an orgasm of seismic proportions.

“That’s right, darlin’.”

“I love it, Ash.” *I love you!*

“Let go for me, darlin’. I’m coming!”

Juliana’s body seized and exploded all around her as the vibrator pressed firmly against her clit, and he roared as he thrust one final time. She could feel his body shaking against her as his cock pulsed within her tender ass, filling her with his cum while her cunt pulsed with her orgasm over and over.

She groaned euphorically and went limp in the seat, and he relaxed against her. Because of their positioning in the chair, she didn’t feel like he was crushing her.

“I think we need a loveseat like this one,” she murmured with a soft chuckle.

“Pretty damn cool, huh?”

“Big understatement, cowboy.”

Ash carefully withdrew and said, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.” He covered her with a blanket and went inside, returning a minute

later with a hot, wet washcloth. “Let me clean you up, and then I’ll carry you back inside.”

“Kay,” she murmured drowsily.

He cleaned all the lubricant off of her and pressed the comforting heat against her anus. He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the gigantic bed inside the cabin.

When she awoke in the morning, it was to the smell of bacon cooking, and the sight of her handsome, half-clothed man making breakfast.

After eating, he bathed her himself in the big tub and then took her back to bed, giving her kisses so sultry she could have sworn her bones melted. He made love to her with such tenderness that she cried as her orgasm rushed over her, and then he kissed her tears away.

Chapter Sixteen

Juliana searched vainly for a parking space close to the rodeo arena on the Tarkett County Fairgrounds. Ash had thrown her for a loop when he'd mentioned that he had signed up to compete in bareback bronc riding at the rodeo in Morehead late that February. It had scared her a little, but she'd encouraged him to give it his all.

She finally resigned herself to a spot some distance from the arena main entrance. The sun was setting, and she was running late as she checked the clock on the dash again.

Work had kept her past the time she'd planned to leave the store, so she'd been forced to drive straight there from work, eating drive-thru food on the way from Divine to Morehead. Ash's event would be one of the first, and she had no intention of disappointing him by not making it in time.

Her high heels clicked on the asphalt as she walked up to the ticket booth and got her ticket. She heaved a sigh of relief when the man in the ticket booth assured her that she'd not missed the bareback riding event and would have plenty of time to find her friends and get settled.

When she reached the top of the ramp he'd directed her to, she turned and looked up into the crowd, locating Teresa and Angel and their group when they all waved at her. As she joined them, she felt a wave of inexplicable happiness come over her. It felt so good to be wanted and accepted by this group. She'd always been on the periphery, limited because of her hours in how much she could do with them.

That feeling of acceptance was tempered by the sad realization that when she saw Ash, it was usually on her turf, either at the store or her house. She rarely made time to come out to the ranch and usually only saw her friends when they came in the store. She loved being here and had to question why she did not make more time for them in her life.

Nobody mentioned her attire, but she regretted not having the time to go home and change, wishing she'd had the forethought to bring her change of clothes with her to the store that morning in case she ran out of time. She smoothed out her skirt as she sat next to Teresa, and Teresa leaned toward her, nudging her in the shoulder.

"You look fine."

"No, I should have brought my clothes so I could change."

"So you'll remember tomorrow. You look great, and you know Ash likes it when you're dressed up like a city girl."

"Huh? He does?" That was news to her.

"Sure! I guarantee you he won't mind a bit when he sees you dressed up, especially with those heels. They're hot on you."

Juliana giggled and thanked her, and then their attention was drawn by the announcer as the rodeo began. It had been years since she'd been to a rodeo, and she thoroughly enjoyed the pageantry and entertainment.

Bareback bronc-riding was one of the first major events. Teresa updated her on what had happened the night before and described in detail how Ash and Joaquin had done compared to the other riders in their respective events.

Nerves knotted in Juliana's stomach when the first rider climbed into the chute. Teresa pointed Ash out to her, standing on the pipe fence, helping out. Seeing him dressed in his chaps and gear with his number placard pinned to his back made her insides quiver. *Damn, but he is hotter than hell.*

Teresa giggled. "I know, right? There is just something about chaps and spurs on Angel and Joaquin that gets me a little fidgety, too."

Had Juliana spoken out loud? She looked over at Teresa, who was blushing, and had to laugh with her and nod.

She sent up a quick prayer for Ash when she saw him climb up on the side of the chute as a bronc was placed in it from the other side. He was completely focused. His actions were swift and sure as he tightened up his grip on the rope then signaled he was ready.

Her body froze in place when the bucking bronc exploded from the chute, all four hooves leaving the ground. Ash kept his seat, riding the animal in swift grace, and Juliana could not help her visceral reaction as she watched his body move with the animal.

She had intimate knowledge of the strength and agility of those finely honed, muscular thighs and that incredibly muscular torso. She felt moisture flow between her legs as his body twisted and turned each time the animal tried unsuccessfully to unseat its rider.

"Don't forget to breathe, Juliana," Teresa whispered in her ear, but her eyes stayed riveted on Ash as he completed his ride. He leapt from the horse after the buzzer sounded, landing on his feet and dodging the horse as it continued to buck for a few more seconds before one of the pickup riders herded it toward the exit.

He climbed back up onto the pipe fence with the other cowboys and scanned the crowd in their section while he waited for his score. She rose and waved at him, and he smiled happily and waved back then blew her a kiss as the crowd cheered his high score of ninety point five. By the end of the night, both Ash and Joaquin were assured a place in the final round the following night, and Juliana was glad she'd be able to be there to see it.

Their group was slowly making its way through the crowded concourse, toward the rear of the arena, when Juliana spied Ash in the crowd. He and Joaquin stood together, talking with a group of enthusiastic rodeo fans and signing autographs.

Juliana was intrigued by this part of Ash she knew very little about. He and Joaquin were better known in the rodeo circuit than he'd let on.

He smiled at her as their group approached. When she would have held back to allow him to talk with the rodeo fans, he beckoned her to his side, the same as Joaquin did with Teresa.

Juliana smiled warmly as Teresa gave Joaquin a kiss, wrapping her arms around his waist and tucking herself to his side. He obviously enjoyed her attention, and Juliana was bowled over again, seeing how much Teresa had changed in the last few months. Her three year old son Michael whooped and hollered as Joaquin gathered him up in his other arm, and Michael hugged his neck as Angel joined them.

She turned to look up into Ash's twinkling, turquoise eyes and allowed him to pull her to him for a passionate kiss. Some of the fans giggled and snickered, and one of them spoke up.

"That your wife, Ash?"

Ash surprised Juliana, looking into her eyes and saying, "If I have anything to say about it, she will be someday." Juliana was struck speechless, a rarity for her, but couldn't find it in herself to speak up and put the positively assumptive cowboy in his place. He chuckled and said, "Naw, Buck, this is my girlfriend, Juliana."

A blonde-haired buckle bunny murmured critically from the crowd, "Looks like nothing but a damned city girl to me, dressed like that. Who's she trying to impress?"

Ash pierced the blonde with his fierce gaze and replied, "Yeah, Judith. I've got a thing for a city girl who *works hard* for a living as opposed to a gal who follows the rodeo circuit like a gypsy. Especially a city girl as beautiful and sexy as Juliana." He held her gently to his side as he said it, and the blonde huffed and stomped away.

The fans eventually dispersed, and Ash turned to her. "Sorry about that, darlin'. I couldn't let that remark go unanswered."

“Which one? The one about me being your wife or the comment about me being a damned city girl?”

Ash smiled slowly, a sexy gleam in his eyes as he leaned down and kissed her again. “Both. Sorry about the mouthy blonde. There are a whole slew of them that view the cowboys as their community property and don’t like outsiders.”

“That sounds like an understatement, judging by the dirty look she gave me.”

“Some of them are pretty flagrant. But that was nothing compared to the hard time she’s given Teresa for being with both Joaquin and Angel. Teresa seems to be handling it okay, though.”

These women were going after Teresa? Juliana turned to Teresa and Joaquin to ask but noticed that Michael was still on Joaquin’s arm, so she didn’t say anything. Teresa shrugged and said, “It’s not like we’ll have to deal with people like her on a regular basis, so I try to not worry about it. She was ugly to you because you’re with us. Weren’t Joaquin and Ash incredible?” Teresa asked, caressing Joaquin’s chest.

Juliana smiled at her change of subject, and they talked as they made their way to the large pavilion where the rodeo dance was being held. Juliana was glad her high heels were comfortable because Ash kept her on the dance floor most of the evening. She did notice throughout the night that both Grace and Teresa garnered more than their fair share of ugly looks from some of the women who showed up for the dance.

Juliana and Ash sat out the line dances, and she allowed Ash to pull her into his lap for a kiss and a little cuddle. Ash offered to get her a beer or soda, but she declined, explaining that her stomach had been a little queasy but did accept a bottle of water when he offered her one. Concerned, he helped her resume her perch in his lap.

“You’re not feeling good, darlin’?”

“It comes and goes. I think it’s just worry about the store and the stress everyone is under. Honestly, I’m ready for a break from it.” The discontent and fatigue she felt draped her like a blanket.

“You know, Grace and Teresa have been talking about a new little boutique somewhere on this side of Morehead. They’ve gotten friendly with the owners, and I heard Grace mention that they were open to the possibility for investment or expansion in their business. You should ask them about it. They sounded excited about the place.”

She honestly couldn’t drum up much enthusiasm for the idea. “Actually I’m thinking of getting away from traditional retail sales. The hours and the stress have worn me down.”

“Yeah, but what if you could set your own hours, have a stake in the store’s success beyond just a paycheck? Plus, I think this store is anything but ‘traditional,’ judging by what they’re saying. It’s an ‘adults only’ sort of store but only sells things for ladies.”

She was willing to admit to a spark of interest, but only a spark. “I wonder what *kinds* of things they sell?”

“All I can tell you is that their men seem to like it when they go shopping there. Maybe you can tag along next time they go.”

She snuggled closer, wriggling in his lap a little, and felt his hardening erection against her backside. “Seems to me like you’re intrigued by the idea as well, honey.”

“Playing with fire, darlin’, and yes, I’m very *intrigued*.” He nuzzled her throat as his hand slid over her knee and caressed her thigh beneath the hem of her knee-length black skirt.

“I’ll make a point of doing that. Plus, it would be nice to spend some time with Grace and Teresa. I haven’t done that near enough.”

She was changing that.

Chapter Seventeen

Ash helped Juliana from her Camaro then lifted her garment bag and overnight case from the trunk and loaded them into Adam's SUV for her. As he turned to Juliana, Charity pulled up and joined their group. Adam, Juliana, Rosemary, Charity, and Eli were making the three-hour trip to Tillman that afternoon.

Angel, Teresa, Joaquin, and Michael had left the night before and made it to Tillman in time, before Teresa's mother passed away due to complications from a stroke. The five of them were going to Tillman as a show of support for their friends but also to help out in a much more concrete way. Teresa had been victimized three years before by the son of a couple who had a lot of power in the town of Tillman. There was strength in numbers.

Ash appreciated how this close-knit family closed ranks around Teresa. In his way, he was doing what he could to help by holding things down at the ranch so that all the other men could be in Tillman. Juliana was going, as well, because she was close to Teresa and had grown up knowing the Palacios family and mourned Mrs. Palacios passing.

"Call me tonight?" Ash asked as he took her in his arms. She looked tired, and he wondered if she'd gotten much sleep the night before.

"I'll call you after the visitation and let you know how it all went."

"I'll look forward to your call."

Ash was slipping into bed later that night when his phone rang.

"Hello, cowboy." Juliana sounded thoroughly wrung out.

“Hey, city girl. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just...” Her voice trailed off, and he heard her sigh.
“I’m just grateful.”

“Grateful?”

“Yeah, grateful for the life I have. For you. For wonderful friends like we have. You would not believe what happened tonight.”

Juliana gave him a few details of how the visitation went and what it had been like to watch Teresa speak up for herself, with all her friends at her back, defending her with their presence.

“I was proud to be a part of that group. The Ferraros never even got a glimpse of Michael. I think Angel and Joaquin are planning to bring Teresa’s dad back with them when they come home.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted. But exhilarated, as well. We should be home by lunchtime tomorrow.”

“Are you getting ready for bed?”

“I’m already in bed.”

“Are you sharing a room?”

“No. I booked my own so I could stay up and read if I wanted to. The others were exhausted. I’m sure they’re already asleep. I also wanted to be able to call you.” Her voice had taken on a husky, sexy quality, like she was stretching out naked.

“I see. Are you under the covers?”

“Yes.”

“And if you’re by yourself, you’re either wearing that scandalous lace nightgown, or you’re wearing nothing at all.”

“I brought the gown, but it’s still in my luggage.”

“So, you’re in bed, talking on the phone with me, and you don’t have a stitch on?”

“Not even half a stitch. I’m *naked*,” she whispered in a sultry tone.

Hot fucking hell, if his dick didn’t sit up and beg. He checked that his bedroom door was locked and then lay back down on the bed, his cock perpendicular and demanding.

Juliana asked, "What about you?"

"You know how I sleep, darlin'." He stroked his engorging shaft as it hardened and tingled almost painfully.

"Mmm, yes I do. Is your cock hard?"

He groaned as his dick responded to her voice, swelling further. "Just talking to you makes it hard. I wish you were here so I could touch you right now."

"Is that all you would do? Touch me?" she asked, sounding breathless.

"No, first I'd lick your pussy."

"But you'd let me suck your cock for you, too, wouldn't you?"

"Darlin', I'd let you do whatever you wanted to. I'm all about pleasing my lady." He stroked his shaft from root to tip, groaning when it twitched as she murmured in approval.

"I'd start at the head and kiss it and then get you nice and wet so that my lips will slide over it slick and smooth."

Ash smiled in remembrance. "I love the way you do that."

"I love the way you taste. I might suck on you a little, listening to your sounds to see if I'm doing it the way you like it. I can tell because you groan deep. Yes, *like that*," she whispered at his heartfelt groan. He could practically feel her lips sliding over him. He stretched out and turned off the lamp, so the room was lit only by the moon.

"If I was there, Juliana, what would you have me do? Tongue that hot little pussy, or would you want me to use my fingers first?"

"I'm spoiled by you. I want both," she replied, her breathing sounded a little shaky. "I want you to suck on my clit, over and over, while I suck your cock, and then I want you to slip a finger inside and strum my sweet spot."

"Are you wet?"

"I've been wet since I got undressed and dialed your number. Now I'm drenched."

Ash groaned deep. “I love the way your silky, wet pussy sounds when I stroke it. Turn the speaker phone on and put it down there where I can hear. Use two fingers and stroke yourself.”

“Ooh. Okay.” Her voice trembled noticeably then he heard a moan and a rustling sound as she turned the speaker phone on and positioned it so he could hear.

She whimpered when he growled, hearing the slippery, wet sounds as her fingers slid over the damp lips of her pussy. He could swear it sounded like she’d grown even wetter. The sheets rustled more, and she moaned again.

“If I was there, darlin’, I’d be licking up all that cream and stroking your sweet spot for you. Does it feel good?”

He closed his eyes in pleasure as his cock surged in his fist. When she groaned in frustration, he backed off on his stroking so she could come with him.

“I know what you need, darlin’. Put your phone on your abdomen and use your other fingers to stroke your clit for me. Use two fingers, one on each side the way you like it, up and down.” She moaned harshly and more rustling sounds could be heard. “Mmm, I love the way your back arches when it feels just right to you. Does it feel just right, now?”

“Yes,” Juliana whispered. “Oh, Ash, it’s so right. I wish it were you here right now.” She cried out again, and he resumed more purposeful stroking on his cock.

“That’s it, darlin’. Keep stroking and let me know when your close.”

He listened for the next minute as her fingers slid in and out of her wet pussy until it sounded like it was flooded with her juices. Her voice softened and grew huskier as she fingered herself with his encouragement. Her breathing changed, and he could barely hear her whisper, “Ash! It’s—”

“Yes,” he murmured as he stroked his cock hard, his balls drawing up. “Come hard with me, now.” He held back, waiting for the sounds

of her ecstasy. A dam broke inside him as he heard her voice change to high-pitched, whimpering moans as her orgasm took her over into bliss. His cock jerked, and his cum pulsed in hot streams onto his abdomen and his hand.

He laid there sated, catching his breath as he listened to her sultry moans and panting as her climax went on and on. It filled him with satisfaction to hear her like that. The only thing better would have been if she were there with his cock embedded inside her, lying panting on his chest.

He listened to her as she caught her breath and sighed, before switching off the speaker phone and putting the phone back to her ear.

“Ash?” Her voice was a satiny whisper in the stillness.

“Was it good?” he asked as he wiped his cum from his belly with tissues.

She sighed shakily. “Yes, but I...”

“What, darlin?”

“I feel lonely now.”

He responded quietly, “I don’t want you to feel lonely. Why don’t you get under the covers and warm up a bit? Tell me why you’re feeling lonely.” He did the same as he waited for her to get situated.

When she settled and put the phone back to her ear, she sounded like her nose was a little stuffy.

“Are you all comfortable now, nice and cozy?”

“Uh-huh,” she murmured, her voice hitching a little.

“Are you crying?” Her sounds tore his heart out, and he thought about getting up, dressing, and getting in his truck to go to her. The sound of her fighting tears made him feel territorial and protective.

“No...yes. Ash, I miss you. Even when you’re not with me, you still make me feel good. I don’t know why I’m being like this,” she replied with a hiccup. “I want you so much right now, just to put my head on your shoulder and have you hold me. I just...need you.”

"Is it like how I feel? My body is satisfied, but my heart wants you cuddled up, with your head on my chest. I miss your scent. If I could hold you, I'd be all right."

"Yes. That's how I feel."

"I'm sorry. The phone sex was supposed to help us feel better. I didn't mean to make you feel worse."

"I think I'd be feeling this way, regardless of whether I'd come or not. I'm just sentimental and foolish."

"I guess we both are. Do you think you can sleep?"

"Yes. Talking to you helped, knowing you feel it, too."

"I do." To him, it sounded like she was still trying to hold herself together. "Maybe the release will help you drift off faster. I hope you feel better in the morning. Then it'll only be a few hours until you're home."

"You're right," she said, her voice hitching again. "I have to go in to the store after lunch tomorrow, but maybe we can see each other after I get off work. I'm visiting with my family for a little while in the morning."

"Good. That'll get your mind off the blues. I'll see you after work. Get some sleep."

"Okay, honey, I—"

"Yeah, darlin?"

"I can't wait to see you tomorrow."

"G'night, darlin'" he murmured, smiling into the darkness. *I love you, too.*

* * * *

Juliana couldn't deny that her heart had throbbed a little harder with each mile that drew them back to Divine from Tillman. Everybody had chatted quietly on the way back, but her mind had been filled with thoughts of Ash and her conversation with him the night before. Their phone sex had been outrageously hot and her heart

pounded with the memory of the way he'd talked her down from it afterward, when she'd missed him and needed him so much. The need she'd felt last night echoed in her body now.

She'd wanted so much to say those words and would've if he'd been there with her. The love she felt for him made her feel vulnerable and her chest ached. She felt exhausted from the last couple of days, but her heart was in a full gallop as Adam pulled the SUV onto the long curving drive to the Divine Creek Ranch.

A ranch hand came to check in with Jack, and Juliana heard the hand tell him that Ash was in Divine running errands. Her eyes stung with suppressed tears as she loaded her things into her car and bid everybody good-bye. Her eyelids felt like sand coated them as she squinted out the windshield. She squelched the urge to tear up because she had to go in to work. There was no point in arriving at the store looking like a tear-stained drama queen. She wondered if perhaps she should call Dr. Guthrie and hoped that she wasn't coming down with a cold or the flu.

She did her best to focus and by the afternoon she felt much better. She had catch-up work that needed to be accomplished today and thought about the plans she'd made to visit Discretion with Grace and Teresa. They'd told her about the store, and she'd been intrigued by the concept and was looking forward to meeting the owners in the near future.

She needn't have worried about the store. All was in order, and the stockroom and sales floor were both running like a well-oiled machine. Leah and Evelyn greeted her in her office, and she gave them the highlights of the last twenty-four hours, minus the more personal details regarding Michael's monstrous grandparents.

When she saw Ash that night, he was his usual, attentive self. After supper, they made up for the night before, by going to bed early and staying entwined after making love until it was time for him to get up and return to the ranch before dawn.

Chapter Eighteen

The following week, Juliana got a call from her cousin Allen. He would be in Divine on official business and called to find out if she wanted to meet him for an early lunch. She happily agreed to meet him at Rudy's. She and Allen had always been close growing up, working together in the restaurant, doing the same jobs. He was the one who'd taught her to dance, and she looked forward to introducing him to Ash. He'd told her he was bringing a surprise with him.

Allen took one look at her and said, "Okay, spill your guts."

Juliana sighed as she sat in the round corner booth at Rudy's, and Allen scooted in beside her. "I can't hide anything from you, damn it."

"You look miserable. What's eating you?"

"About six foot, three inches worth of big, handsome, blue-eyed cowboy, that's what."

"Um, I think that might be a little too much information."

Juliana suppressed a small smile and thumped him in the ribs. "You know what I meant."

"So there's someone in your life again? That's good news, if he's treating you well, that is."

"Ash is great. He's Jack, Ethan, and Adam's foreman out at their ranch. He's hard-working and has good manners."

"That's great news. Somehow I could never picture you with that other guy, the real estate agent. He seemed too..."

"Soft and smarmy? Yes, I agree. Lying, cock-sucking, cheating bastard." Juliana said it with a smile, realizing she hadn't thought of Lawrence at all in weeks.

Allen grinned and chuckled. “Damn. Tell me how you *really* feel.”

“Ash is awesome.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

She nodded tensely. “I’ve gotten myself into a situation.”

The waiter approached to take their orders and bring their drinks. Once he left, Allen turned to her, speaking quietly because the restaurant was becoming more crowded.

“What’s up? You want to talk about it? You know you can tell me anything.”

“Well, as you can probably tell, I’m head over heels in love with him, but I haven’t told him.”

“Why?”

“Because the time never seems right, and when it’s right, we were usually talking on the phone like when I was in Tillman. He told me he loved me on Valentine’s Day but said he didn’t want me to say those words until I was really sure. With our work schedules, we haven’t been able to get together much, and when we are...I just chicken out every time.”

“He’s giving you the chance to tell him without feeling prompted. With all that red hair and Grandma Lila’s temper, I’ve never known you to be a chickenshit before. That’s new.”

“Shut up!” She felt her cheeks heat up. That sounded exactly like something Ash would say. “So what’s my surprise?” she asked eagerly, changing the subject like the chickenshit that she was.

“Mom and Aunt Violet went through Grandma Lila’s jewelry box.”

“*Really?*” she asked, her surprised exclamation drawing the momentary attention of several diners. She lowered her voice. “And everybody was okay with that?”

“It’s been a while since she and Grandpa passed. Everybody agreed it was time. Before she passed away, Grandma Lila made a list of things that she wanted to go to specific people. It’s a good thing,

too. Otherwise, there's no telling if these would've come to you," he said as he pulled her grandmother's engagement ring and wedding bands out of his pocket and held them out to her. She started crying and he added "My gut tells me you're going to need these soon."

She held the rings in her fingers and looked at them before she reached over to hug Allen. Of all the things that could've been passed down to her, these rings were the most precious.

"Would you say yes if he asked?"

She nodded happily. "Yes! I would." She felt her cheeks tingle when several restaurant patrons looked over in curiosity.

"Grandma must've known that special things like this would be a bone of contention. Personally, I think it's pathetic that it took this long for them to agree to deliver the items on the list to their rightful inheritors. Grandpa must've made a list at the same time because they gave me Grandpa's wedding band."

"Wow. I can imagine the big stink all this caused."

"No, I think Grandma and Grandpa got it right. We're the youngest of all the grandkids and the least likely to inherit much, but we're also the only ones that are still unmarried. And yeah, Tillie was *pissed as hell*. She thought for sure all the wedding bands would go to the oldest grandchild, whether they were already married or not." Tillie was Allen's much older, married sister. He held out the weathered, plain man's gold band to her.

"It's not right that they should be split up, Juliana. I want you to have it, as well." Juliana was struck dumb by his selflessness. "Besides, I have no immediate plans to marry," he said softly as he opened her shaking hand and placed it in her palm. She could hear the regret in his voice.

She closed her hand and put her arms around his neck and whispered, "I'm so sorry, Allen. I know how much you loved her."

"I let her down. I had no idea what she was going through until she was gone. I never told Teresa how I felt about her. She deserved better than someone who couldn't even put two intelligent words

together in her presence. I kept thinking she'd come back. She looks so happy with her men, and I think they'll make fine fathers to Michael."

"Allen, the right woman is out there for you. Shouldn't you hold on to this for when she shows up?"

"No, I want the rings to stay together. And I'm happy knowing you'll have them. Plus, it'll really piss Tillie off when I tell her that I gave it to you," Allen added with a dry laugh.

Juliana wiped tears from her cheeks as she snickered, "Well, you know what they say? It's better to be *pissed off*—"

"—than *pissed on*. Tell the man you love him. If you've learned anything from my wretched love life, it's that you need to learn to trust your feelings and go for it."

"Yeah. There's just one little hitch that's presented itself to my happily ever after," she whispered so that there was no chance of being overheard.

"Now what?"

"Ash is going to be a daddy."

Allen looked down at her sitting beside him in the booth, smiled, and kissed her forehead.

"I found out this morning."

"You're going to have to buy me dessert if you want me to not go blabbing *that* news to your folks."

"Don't you dare. Not until after I talk to Ash and they have a chance to meet him. I guess I have to go pay a visit to him after we eat, huh?"

"Sooner, the better. When do you expect the new arrival?"

"Late September, early October. Plus, I have other changes to make in my life. I think I'm ready to move on from my current position."

They talked while they ate then Allen grabbed the check off the table before she could. He hugged her again after he paid the bill, and they parted ways to go back to work.

Back at work, the break room was abuzz with plans for a going-away party for an employee who was moving out of state. Her husband was in the military and being reassigned to a base in North Carolina. Several of the ladies had planned a surprise send-off for her that night at The Dancing Pony.

When Evelyn asked her, Juliana allowed her to load all the decorations and housewarming gifts for the young lady's new home into the trunk of her Camaro to take over there that evening.

Distracted, she tried out different lines to tell Ash the news. She grew more and more regretful that the news that she truly loved him had to come with the news she was also pregnant.

Juliana didn't regret the baby at all. That surprised her because she witnessed up close and personal what it was like for Teresa with Michael.

She was grateful that she hadn't had any morning sickness. Although if she had, she *might* have tumbled to the fact that she was pregnant a little sooner. She was already two and a half months along. Her stomach twisted up in knots imagining all the scenarios and Ash's reaction to the news.

She finally gave up trying to concentrate on work. Finishing what absolutely had to be done, she told Evelyn and the other employee planning the going-away party that she'd see them at The Pony at the appointed time that evening.

* * * *

Juliana took the opportunity to stop in and say hello to Teresa, hoping to find some courage along the way. A little while later, three of Teresa's homemade tacos in hand, Juliana drove around to the first red barn and pulled up near the door. There were ranch hands going about their day, and when she asked one of them where she could find Ash, he pointed through the side door of the barn to the corral located there.

Carrying the tacos, she made her way through the pristinely clean barn and out the door. Ash stood by the corral, presumably watching one of the other ranch hands working with a lively young colt.

Her phone rang in her pocket, and she slipped it out to answer it. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Allen. Mom would kill me if I forgot to mention it, and I almost did. When she was looking at Lila's ring, she thought that one of the diamonds felt a little loose in its setting. You might want to have a jeweler take a look at it. That's it."

"Are you on your way back?"

"About halfway there now."

"Will you thank your mom for me? And thank you, Allen. You're very special to me."

His deep, raspy laugh came through clear on the line. "It's because I'm just so fricking precious. You tell your man the news yet?"

Over the knot of nervousness reforming in her throat, she said, "I'm about to."

"Oh! Good luck. Let me know how it goes. I promise, I won't tell anyone."

"Kay, love you."

"Me, too, bye."

She put the phone away as she made her way over to the side of the corral where Ash stood. She removed the rings and placed them in her skirt pocket.

When she looked up, Ash was watching her from across the corral. His hat was pulled down low against the sun's glare, so she couldn't see his eyes very well. She smiled nervously and waved as she approached him.

"Hi. I brought you a snack. Teresa sent them for you." She wondered if he could even hear her over the lump in her throat. He didn't move from the spot where he stood, his boot hitched up on one

of the pipe rails of the corral. He spoke indistinctly to the ranch hand, who led the energetic colt from the corral back to the barn.

Ash seemed tense as she approached, and she wondered if something had happened that morning to make him act this way. He was taking over duties as foreman for Angel. Maybe he needed to play it cool for the other ranch hands so they'd respect him. She could understand that, to a point.

She sidled close to him, and he took the paper sack she offered. He thanked her politely, looking out across the corral. No hug, no kiss, he didn't even look into her eyes. Wasn't this taking "playing it cool" a little far?

Nervously, she finally spoke when he said nothing else to her. "I-I have some news to share with you."

"Oh, yeah?"

A chill swept from her tailbone to her neckline at his cool tone. "U-um, yeah."

He looked down at the ground, so she couldn't see his face. "You can save yourself the trouble, Juliana. I already know your news."

Stunned, she looked at what she could see of his profile. "You already know? How? How could you know?" Doctor-patient privilege applied to her test results, but she knew that people gossiped. She couldn't make the connection between the staff at Doctor Guthrie's office and the Divine Creek Ranch. That couldn't be it. The only other person who knew was Allen.

Ash quickly clarified for her. "You were overheard at Rudy's. A hand was there while you were there. He told me what he heard."

"Oh." He did know. Her heart raced wildly. He wasn't happy about her news. What did she say now?

"Seems you drew some attention to yourself."

"Oh." Damn it, was that all she could think of to say? Strong, mouthy Juliana had left the building evidently.

"It's okay, Juliana. I understand how you must feel. But you gotta remember we never made any real commitments to each other. Just play it cool and do what you have to do."

"I don't understand." Never in a million years would she have guessed *that* would be his reaction to news that she was pregnant.

"I already know your news. You don't have to explain yourself. Take care of *whatever* yourself, and don't worry about me. It's not that big a deal, okay? You'll be fine."

Whatever?

Her voice shook a little and cold shivers swept over her skin. "But Ash, I needed to tell you. You needed to know how I feel." This was her fault for putting off telling him the obvious. Clearly, he didn't mean that he didn't have feelings for her. She could see it in his eyes whenever he looked at her.

"I think I have a pretty clear picture of how you feel. I heard about your news in great detail. I don't care. It's obvious you and I don't feel the same way about each other. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here telling me all this. Do what you have to do."

A sob escaped from Juliana's throat, and she unconsciously leaned her forehead against his triceps, which was stretched up so that his forearms rested on the top rail of the corral. "But I—Ash, you don't understand. *I love you*," she said in a shaky whisper, her fingertips brushing against his ribs.

The tension coiled in his muscles, and he stepped away from her, leaving her to wobble forward as he withdrew from her. She felt a fault line open in her chest at his hasty withdrawal.

"Then you're even more confused than I thought, Juliana, if you can stand there and tell me that," he spat out in a sarcastic tone. "*That* is not something I'll ever be ready for, and I can't believe you'd even think about it. I thought you knew me. I don't *share*."

He was angry because she'd hoped he would want to share a life with her and their baby. She couldn't believe her ears. How had she so stupidly misjudged him?

The fault line quaked in her chest as she remembered his words after they'd had unprotected sex. He'd told her he would take responsibility for his actions. He'd lied. Not that she would've accepted it, but he didn't even make the offer of paying for an abortion. As the thought slammed into her, anger came close on its heels, and a fierce, protective instinct inside of her roared to the surface.

"I came here to share the news with you. You already seem to know. So, I guess I've done what I came to do. Nice knowing you, cowboy." She turned on her heel and walked back to the side door when realization slammed into her. She faltered a step but kept going, her head held high.

She didn't realize how much she'd come to enjoy all his little endearments. Calling him cowboy reminded her that he usually responded in kind with city girl or darlin'.

Now she saw how meaningless all of that was to him. It was just part of his southern charm. He probably called the girl at the convenience store down the road darlin'. It meant nothing to him, just like she had meant nothing to him but an easy lay, just like the baby meant nothing. There were no endearments forthcoming now because she was an inconvenience.

Juliana nodded to Angel and Joaquin, who both bore surprised and concerned looks on their faces as they watched her pass. Realizing she must look like crap, she put her hands to her face and wiped away the deluge of tears that she had been unaware of until that moment. What useless things those tears were. They were wasted on him. He could go fuck himself if he thought she would treat this as casually as he did.

She buckled her seatbelt and started the Camaro. She drove down the long drive, remembering a far different reception the last time she'd driven down this driveway at Teresa's wedding. By the time she made it back to town, depression and fatigue had taken hold.

Making an impulsive decision, she sat in her car and made three phone calls, to Doug Woodworth in Morehead, Leah and Evelyn at the store, and to Allen. She cried her eyes out through the last one, and Allen wanted to return to Divine and kick Ash's sorry ass, but she told him it wasn't worth it. Then she went inside and began packing her bags.

Chapter Nineteen

Ash held on to the pipe fence for dear life as his city girl turned on her heel and sashayed away from him, for the last time. It was on the tip of his tongue to stop her and get on his knees and beg her to stay, to choose him. But she'd made her feelings known, publicly. He couldn't stop her if she'd already made a choice, one that unfortunately didn't include him. Maybe this was why she'd held off telling him she loved him so long. She'd had something totally different in mind.

He heard footsteps approach. Shadows bracketed his as he continued looking down at the dusty ground, and then he heard Joaquin's voice. "You okay, Ash?"

"Yeah, fine, why?" He tried to still the shakiness in his voice.

"Juliana just blew through the barn, looking devastated. She was crying."

"Was she?" Was Joaquin exaggerating? The ranch hand who overheard her and that peace officer from Tillman had assured him she'd been ecstatic as he handed her an engagement ring. He'd told him she'd said, "Yes," loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear.

If that was so, why would she be crying now? She'd told him she loved him. She must've been hoping for a ménage relationship like the other men had with Teresa. He knew he could never do it. Not with someone he'd known all his life, like Jack and the others had, and certainly not with a man he'd never met. His heart cratered a little more.

Getting his attention back, Angel replied, "Yeah, she was very distressed."

His throat closed over the words as he spoke them, needing to get away. “Well, you know how it is with Juliana. She’s a little on the hotheaded side. I’m sure she’ll be fine.” He chose to leave it at that.

“Well, okay,” Angel said uncertainly. “But if you need to go after her, let us know. She looked like she was really hurting.”

Did he have to twist the damn knife like that? “I’ll let you know. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Joaquin said, but there was a note of disbelief in his voice, and he sounded like he wanted to say more. They walked off, speaking quietly to each other.

The phone in his pocket rang, and his heart lurched, hoping it was her so he could apologize for being so harsh with her. But caller ID made him curse instead. This whole situation was now officially FUBAR. *Fucked up beyond all recognition.*

* * * *

Teresa overheard the men’s conversation as they came in through the front door for lunch late that morning. “It wasn’t like him to allow her to leave like that,” Joaquin said.

“There’s probably more to it than what we saw. Maybe she needed time to cool off, and he knew that, so he let her go,” Angel replied.

“But did you see her face? I’ve got a strong suspicion that was no tantrum. If it had been Teresa, I wouldn’t have let her get behind a steering wheel.”

“Maybe he let her go in favor of not causing a scene. You remember what her temper is like?”

“Yeah.”

Teresa came from the hallway. “What’s the matter?” she asked as she was drawn into Angel’s embrace. After she’d greeted and kissed both men, they explained what they had seen to her.

The men went and sat down on the couch in the living room. Michael was sitting on the floor with a coloring book and crayons spread out. Teresa climbed into Joaquin's lap when he reached for her, and she said, "Juliana came by here a little while ago. She looked tired, and she said she had to talk to Ash and mentioned something about decisions she needed to make."

The men looked at each other with troubled expressions, and Angel said, "Well, when she left, it looked like she hadn't gotten the reception she'd hoped for."

Their conversation moved on to other topics as she put lunch on the table, but Juliana and her mysterious news stayed in the forefront of Teresa's mind. After they finished, she kissed all three of her men, including Michael who was hanging on Angel's back, before the three of them left to finish their work day.

Teresa had a sneaking suspicion she knew what was going on but was having a hard time putting it all together. Teresa knew Ash well enough by now to be certain that if Juliana were pregnant, he would be overjoyed. Ash was excellent father material, if she could judge by how he treated Michael when he hung around the barn. The more the news her husbands had shared with her rolled around in her head, the more it didn't make sense.

Knowing she might be interfering in something that was none of her business, she picked up her phone. Teresa called Juliana's cell and rolled straight to voice mail. She called Juliana's home phone, and the answering machine picked up. Juliana wasn't usually one to screen calls. Teresa called the store and talked to Evelyn. After hanging up, she was even more confused.

Evelyn told her that Juliana seemed upset the last time she'd talked to her. Juliana had said she was taking a short-term emergency leave of absence and that she planned to be gone only a week, two at the most. Juliana had offered no excuse or other information beyond an apology for the inconvenience.

“Juliana didn’t tell you where she was going? Did something happen at the store?”

“She didn’t tell me her destination. This morning the only thing out of the ordinary was her cousin inviting her to lunch at Rudy’s. Juliana said he was in town for a court appearance and had a surprise for her.”

“Hmm.”

“I’d call Allen, Teresa. He might know something.”

She sat with her phone in her hand, contemplating what she should do. She decided against calling Allen just yet. Juliana was a big girl. Maybe their talk had nothing to do with the conclusion she was jumping to and she’d only embarrass herself if she stepped in without all the facts.

* * * *

Dressed in a pair of ancient, faded blue jeans and a fuzzy peach-colored sweater, Juliana pulled into the parking lot of The Dancing Pony. She wasn’t dressed to come in for the party. Her favorite comfort clothes made the prospect of making happy with the other employees then facing the long drive ahead of her a little easier to bear. She’d remained in town only long enough to drop off the decorations and gifts for the party early that evening.

She put a smile on her face so they’d all think she was merely leaving for an impromptu vacation. Lifting the shopping bag and cardboard box, she carried it all in, thanking the man who held the door open for her. Barbara’s car was in the parking lot, so Juliana knew she was already there setting the tables up for the party. The others wouldn’t be off for another half hour.

Two bubbly-sounding women came in right behind her, chattering as they passed her in the entrance to the club. Waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim light, Juliana finally spotted Barbara, talking to one

of the waitresses in the corner closest to the entryway and made a beeline for her.

The music was pounding, and there were quite a few customers already there, many of them sitting at tables or dancing. Barbara waved as she approached and came to help her with her load.

“Barbara, but I’m not going to stay. I’m headed out of town tonight.”

“You are? Everything okay?” Barbara asked, scrutinizing her face.

“Yes. I’m just overdue for a vacation,” she replied with what she hoped passed for nonchalance.

“I’ll say. You’ve been looking tired,” she said with a maternal tone. “When was the last time you took a vacation? It’s been years, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’d say you’re due. Where are you going?”

“I’d rather not say. My cell phone is turned off. If anybody needs to reach me, they can call Evelyn.”

“I understand completely. I hope it’s a cruise or a hot island getaway.”

“Nothing that grand. Just time to rest and think.” And make plans for her and her baby’s future.

“Taking that handsome cowboy with you?” Barbara asked as she gestured across the room, and then she frowned and tilted her head.

Juliana looked in the direction Barbara had indicated. Her heart turned to ice in her chest, and every muscle in her body locked down. She took a breath, and the fault-line in her chest cracked a little wider.

Ash sat with his back to her at a table on the other side of the club. His hat was still on, and his back was turned, but she recognized that powerful physique. She’d memorized it with her eyes, her lips, and her tongue, every part of her in fact, and she would’ve known him anywhere.

The two bubbly women who'd come in behind her had just joined his table, where two other women sat with him. They were all talking at once, sweet commiseration and love on their faces. One of them jostled his arm, laughing. He turned to her and kissed her cheek and let her hug him.

Another one pulled his hat from his head and put it on her own before she kissed his cheek. She was awfully young-looking and beautiful, as they all were, and Juliana knew she could never hold up in comparison. The young one took her chair again, and Juliana counted four women at his table once they were all seated around him.

A weird, creepy-crawly sensation swept over her skin as adrenaline dumped into her system. That fierce protectiveness swelled inside her again, even as her heart broke. This was how long it took him to get back in the "swing" of things. That's how much her declaration of love meant to him.

At the slightest hint of adversity, he turned and ran, straight into someone else's arms. She watched as another of the women rose from her seat and pulled him from his and they stepped on the dance floor. The tingling sensation continued, and Juliana knew it probably wasn't good for the baby to be experiencing her nerves and emotionally upset state, nor was it wise to react like this with Barbara standing there observing.

She glanced at Barbara, and sympathy was all she saw. "No, Barbara. I'm spending some time alone. If you don't mind, I'm taking off, though." Juliana turned and headed back to the entryway, keys in hand. She greeted Eli and Rachel Wolf mechanically as they entered when she exited. Her false smile felt too bright and fake as she told them she was fine.

* * * *

Teresa walked in the door of The Dancing Pony, and Rachel beckoned her over. “Have you talked to Juliana lately?”

The gut feeling Teresa had been having all day intensified. “Yes, why?”

“Well, she left here a few minutes ago, barely even saying hello to us. Then we spotted *that* when we came in,” Rachel muttered as she pointed a finger at Ash and the four women seated with him at his table, looking like she was ready to open a fresh can of *whoop-ass* on somebody.

Eli turned to Teresa. “Did something happen we haven’t heard about yet?”

Teresa replied, “No, but I’m going to find out. Now. This is all very strange.”

Teresa found Barbara and asked if Juliana had said anything to her about leaving town. Barbara gave her the details on what happened earlier. Teresa took out her cell phone and excused herself, more and more convinced that something terribly convoluted had happened today. She couldn’t put her finger on it but knew someone who could help her do that.

Rachel stood outside with her while she dialed the number.

“Allen? Hi, it’s Teresa. Thank you, I’m fine. Listen, this isn’t a social call, so I need to get to the point. Have you talked to Juliana this afternoon? *What is going on?*”

Teresa could tell that Rachel overheard his responses, and as they put two and two together, Rachel grew visibly angrier. She started to walk back into the club, but Teresa gently grasped her wrist and looked up at her as she listened to Allen’s agitated voice, shaking her head negatively.

Rachel muttered softly, “One minute with that mutton-chopped horn-dog. Give me one minute.”

Teresa smiled at Rachel’s ready defense of her friend. Looking over Rachel’s shoulder, Teresa smiled as Angel and Joaquin walked up, curious looks on their faces.

“Thanks, Allen. Stay where you are for right now. I’ll call you back, I promise. No, that won’t be necessary. You’re *supposed* to be a peace officer, remember?” More garbled words on his end and then she hung up.

Joaquin gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek. “Hey, sugar. Did you meet Ash’s sisters yet? They’re all supposed to be here by now.”

Rachel looked like she practically swallowed her tongue before letting out a choked laugh. Teresa rolled her eyes as it dawned on them. What a comedy of errors. Only it wasn’t so funny.

“Who?” Teresa asked, biting her lip, looking at Joaquin and Angel.

“Ash’s sisters all rolled into town today. He was supposed to meet them here this evening. What’s going on?”

“One of the Divine Creek ranch hands did a fair amount of talebearing today and set some things in motion that he should have stayed out of. We need to talk to Ash.”

Chapter Twenty

Ash smiled when Teresa, Joaquin, Angel, and Rachel walked over to his table, and he stood up. After the introductions were made, he noticed the way Rachel and Teresa scrutinized Debbie, Dana, Donna, and Denae.

Rachel looked at Teresa and said cryptically, “She probably never got close enough to notice.”

Teresa looked at Ash and his sisters and said, “It’s about as obvious as it can be, isn’t it?”

He barely heard her over the music, and when he asked her to repeat herself, Angel gestured for them all to come out into the foyer where they could hear each other.

“Now, what were you saying?”

“There has been a tremendous misunderstanding, Ash,” Teresa began.

Ash felt a knot form in his chest, thinking of Juliana and her news. “What kind of misunderstanding?”

“When Juliana came to you this afternoon, did you give her a chance to explain her news before she left?”

He thought for a second. “No. I already knew what she had to say, and I didn’t want to hear it from her lips. I told her it was okay, that we must not have felt the same way about each other.”

At the horrified look in Teresa’s eyes, he felt the knot in his chest swell to painful proportions.

“Why would you *say* that?”

“Because Randall saw her at Rudy’s with another guy. A sheriff’s patrol or something from Tillman. He offered her a ring, and she got

all excited and happy and accepted it from him. She told him yes. He saw the whole thing and overheard part of it.”

Ash thought Teresa looked like she was about to start cussing. Normally, she was such a sweet, placid person, but there was fire in her eyes as she stared at him now. Whatever it was, it was really bad.

“Stupid man. Randall heard enough to take the whole thing out of context and probably couldn’t wait to get back to tell you. Isn’t he the one who hooked up with that crazy woman, Brenda? He probably couldn’t wait to get back and slip the knife in and turn it a few times after you barred his free supply of pussy from the Divine Creek Ranch. What he saw, he misconstrued, you big, dumb...freaking redneck.”

“Well, now, wait just a second. There’s no need for name calling,” said his overprotective sister Debbie. Ash put his hand on her shoulder and shook his head. He didn’t take offense at Teresa’s words, because he had a feeling she was about to prove the truth in them.

“What did he get wrong?” one of his sisters, Dana, asked sympathetically. Dana was the peacemaker in the bunch.

Teresa continued, “Juliana came to you today, hoping for a strong shoulder to lean on. The ring that all this confusion centers around belonged to her grandmother, Lila. It was her inheritance. And the man who offered it to her was her *cousin*, Allen Jacobs, the sheriff in Tillman.”

“Oh, fuck.” Ash groaned, hating the sinking feeling in his gut. “Her cousin.”

“But there is more, Ash,” Teresa began, and the sympathetic gleam of unshed tears in her eyes flat out *scared* him. “I talked with Allen a few minutes ago, and he told me what she said to him at lunch. Juliana wanted you to know she loved you, and she felt silly for waiting so long to tell you.”

The stricken look on Juliana’s face and his response to her words raced through his mind. “She told me, and I turned it around on her.

I...oh fuck, *what I said!* I insulted her for telling me she loved me. I thought she meant something completely different.”

Spunky little Donna put her fists on her hips and demanded, “Dumbass, how do you misunderstand when someone tells you they love you?” The four Peterson women rounded on him, all talking at once. None of them were over five and a half feet tall, all their heads tilted up at him, fussing at him at the same time, their sandy blonde curls bobbing animatedly, their matching piercing, turquoise-blue eyes drilling him angrily as they gave him the dressing down he so richly deserved.

Joaquin and Angel guided the group out the front door, and thankfully, there weren’t any customers approaching from the parking lot.

“That poor girl!” His baby sister, Denae, hauled off and kicked him with the pointed toe of her little cowgirl boot.

“Ow!”

Teresa spoke up again, once the sisters had finished giving him hell as he rubbed his shin. “There’s *more*, Ash. Not only did you reject her love when she offered it, you sent her away telling her you already knew her news and that she didn’t have a commitment from you and that you were fine with whatever she did, right?” she said as she ticked each point off on her fingers.

He cringed when he heard his words paraphrased but basically regurgitated for him. “Yeah, I suppose that’s what I said, or something like it.”

“I want you to think about what you told her, based on your assumptions, when I tell you what her news *actually* was.”

* * * *

Eli could hear the women fussing all the way from outside. He went to the door and was met by an unusual sight. The women with Ash were yelling at him, and then one kicked Ash in the shin. There

was more talk, and since Rachel and Teresa seemed perfectly safe, he didn't join them but merely observed from inside.

Teresa looked thoroughly pissed with Ash as she spoke in an irate tone, though Eli couldn't hear her actual words. She must've dropped one hell of a bomb because there was a moment of stunned silence. All eyes got big, all jaws dropped. Then the women, who all bore a striking resemblance to Ash in coloring, went completely *apeshit* on him, right there on the sidewalk. Screaming, punching, kicking, and cursing at him. The tallest one actually whapped the big cowboy upside his head before they all started crying.

Eli noted that Rachel looked as though she wanted to egg the girls on, to beat on Ash some more. She happened to glance up and see him standing at the glass door and blew him an air kiss. He grinned back at her. Life would be so boring without passionate women.

Ash acted like he deserved the ineffectual beating he was getting and rubbed his face with his hands as one sister pointed her finger at him then jerked her thumb at his truck, her eyes blazing. It was easy to read her lips and the condemnation on her face as she said, "*Just wait 'til I tell Mom.*"

Then, in a change of mood only a woman could have managed, they all hugged him sympathetically and nodded at him as he spoke to each one, hugged Teresa and Rachel, shook hands with the guys, and then headed to his truck. Eli held the door open as they all came back inside the club, talking quietly.

Rachel hugged him and said, "You're *not* going to believe this."

* * * *

Ash climbed in his truck, opened the console, and fished around for a notepad and something to write with. He punched in the phone number Teresa had given him and prepared to have his ass handed to him. The line connected, and a male voice answered.

“Allen Jacobs.” Concise and professional, expecting the person calling to get to the point.

“Sheriff Jacobs, this is Ash Peterson.”

“You sorry, mother*fucking* son of a bitch!”

Ash let him go on for about a minute.

When Jacobs showed signs of tapering off, Ash interrupted. “Yeah, you’ve never met a sorrier son of a bitch.”

Allen paused before speaking again. “The only reason you would know how to reach me is if Teresa gave you my number. The only reason I can think of for you to call me is that you’re planning on doing some heavy-duty groveling in the near future. What the fuck are you doing out with four women after sending my cousin away brokenhearted? This had *better* be good.”

“The women in question are my sisters,” he replied as he pulled the diamond ring from his pocket where he’d hidden it that morning. “They’re here because they all wanted to meet your cousin. They planned to surprise Juliana with a bridal shower.”

He’d planned to propose to her that evening and bring her to The Pony so his sisters could meet her. He’d ruined it all though, listening to the gossip of someone he should’ve known better than to trust, instead of allowing her a chance to explain the precious reality to him.

“Bridal shower?”

“Yes, before my head took its vacation up my ass, I had planned on proposing to Juliana when I saw her this evening. Now it turns out Juliana showed up at the club and saw me with them, thinking I was out partying.”

“Teresa told you everything?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can you imagine how Juliana must have felt?” Jacobs asked in a grating tone.

Ash opened his mouth, and his breath left him as he remembered the way she’d placed her little forehead on his arm and reached out to touch him and how he’d rejected her. He’d done that to the woman

who was carrying his baby. His heart froze when he realized she was on the road somewhere alone right now. And knowing her, she was probably driving straight through the night to wherever she was headed.

"No, sir. I can't." Nothing he could say would make it sound any better.

"Are you going to her?"

"Yes, Sheriff, if you'll let me. I need you to tell me where she is."

"That depends. What are you going to do when you get to her?"

"Grovel. Beg her to marry me. Take responsibility for the baby she carries. And then do a little more listening than talking."

Jacob's voice carried the barest hint of good humor. "Teresa tells me you're a good man, not normally prone to such stupidity. I trust what *she* tells me. You got a pen?"

Allen gave him directions to get to the family Gulf Coast getaway house in Rockport, northeast of Corpus Christi. Ash thanked him, checked his watch, and jumped out of the truck and hurried back into the club. His sisters came all that way, and he couldn't leave without letting them know where he was headed.

Twenty minutes later, he was gassing up at the station on the corner. It was nearly ten o'clock, and she had at least three hours head start on him. If he drove straight through, he could be there by four the next morning.

He was still deeply troubled, but a hopeful thought made his chin tremble. He whispered in a shaky voice, "I'm gonna be a daddy."

* * * *

Ash cursed a blue streak as he set the phone down in his console. Part of him felt like he deserved all of this as he looked out into the black desolation of the country road he was stranded on. He was so caught up in worrying about Juliana he hadn't noticed the warning signs of a failing generator. And of course, by the time he figured out

what was going on, he was in the middle of nowhere and his phone had zero signal. Perfection made even better because he'd checked his map and decided to try a shortcut on a country road.

He had no option but to walk to the nearest town at two o'clock in the morning. His choices were to walk fifteen miles back to the tiny town of Ashburn or walk twenty miles ahead to the even tinier town of Wilton on roads that zigged back and forth around cotton and maize fields. No way was he stopping at some lone farmhouse, probably scaring the daylights out of the rural occupants or getting chased by their dogs. He opted to head back to the larger town after setting out his mobile flasher units so that anyone coming along wouldn't accidentally slam into his big truck.

Three miles down the road, he wished he'd taken the time to go home and change into more comfortable boots, but then he hadn't known he'd be hoofing it in the middle of the night.

Six miles down the road, he groaned as he was pelted by rain drops. His slicker was in the truck.

Ten miles down the road, rain drops pummeled him from the side as the frigid wind blew them straight at him. They gathered and funneled down his chest and back, warming only slightly as they ran into the crack of his ass.

It was indeed *possible* to be a damn sight sorrier about everything that had happened in the last twelve hours as he realized he'd left his phone in the truck. He couldn't even check it as he progressed, to see if he could get a signal.

"You're a damned son of a bitch, Ash Peterson, and you deserve every single bit of what is happening to you right now, and you know it," he muttered as he drew his icy-cold jacket collar to his throat, trying to keep the rain from running down his neck into his shirt.

He cursed again when he remembered he was wearing the new black felt cowboy hat sweet little Dana had given him for Christmas. It was probably ruined, but at least it was keeping the rain off his head.

Twelve miles down the road, a stray dog came up snarling from a drainage ditch, startling the shit out of him before biting him in the ankle. Lucky for him, he'd been wearing boots. It took a few minutes to scare the dog off so he wouldn't follow him, and by then, he could see the lights of Ashburn in the distance, far off.

Five minutes later, he came to the first of three half-full, low water crossings. Thirty minutes later after crossing the third one, he stopped in disgust and hopped around one footed on the asphalt to dump the water out of his three hundred dollar cowboy boots, believing that God must have a really wicked sense of humor.

By the time he walked into Ashburn, it was seven o'clock. He'd been saved the last half mile of the walk because an old farmer had come along and offered him a ride. Due to his drenched, muddy state, he declined the invitation to ride inside, opting instead to ride on the tailgate, getting thoroughly chilled by the early morning wind in the process.

The farmer pulled the truck to the side of the road, outside the local garage. He told Ash he could probably expect the local mechanic to show up at the coffee shop across the street about seven-thirty or eight...or maybe nine.

Ash was numb as he nodded to the waitress when he slid into the seat of the corner booth of the coffee shop. Smiling in sympathy at his disheveled state, she brought him a menu and a steaming hot cup of coffee.

Ash explained his situation, and she told him she would keep an eye out for his guy and took his order. Ash vowed silently that he would make sure his appreciation was reflected in the tip he was leaving her as he took his first sip of the strong, steaming hot coffee. She deserved at least that much for allowing him to come in, looking the way he did.

Chapter Twenty-one

Juliana cranked open the fresh can of coffee before going hunting for a filter in the pantry. When the coffeemaker was gurgling and hissing, she unlocked and opened the sliding door that looked out onto the canal and pulled closed the screen door so the clean, cool gulf breeze could blow through the stuffy house.

She found the skillet in the cabinet and made herself breakfast, opting for breakfast tacos since that's what she'd been in the mood for when she'd stopped at the grocery store on the way out of Divine. She fried hash browns with onions and once they were browned, poured the beaten eggs into the skillet with them.

Even though there was a chill in the air, Juliana decided to eat out on the back deck. After wrapping up in a thick blanket, she took her coffee and breakfast outside. The cool, cleansing breeze made her feel better. She pulled the cover off of a deck chair and took a seat then put her steaming coffee cup on the deck railing and looked out over the gulf.

It smelled like rain on the breeze, but Juliana didn't feel any as she snuggled down into the blanket and wolfed down her breakfast. She'd just laid the plate on the deck and lifted her coffee mug to her lips when she heard the inquisitive meow of a cat. A split second later, a huge, charcoal-grey tomcat with brilliant green eyes made an appearance on the railing, beside her chair.

"Well, hello to you, too, big boy," she said softly.

He meowed loudly in response to her in a gravelly, old tom cat voice then began to purr loudly when she reached out a tentative hand for him to sniff. He smelled the food on her fingers and licked them

before turning his attention to her plate on the deck. After he'd licked it clean, he meowed before plopping heavily into her lap.

"Whoa, dude! Who's been feeding you?" she asked as she scratched his head, trying hard to ignore the shudder that went through her stomach at his landing and the slightly nauseated feeling that followed. "Evidently the whole neighborhood."

Obviously a lover *and* a fighter, the hefty tomcat meowed noisily again then brushed her on the cheek with the side of his head, showing her his ragged left ear, probably damaged in a fight with another tomcat.

He brushed against her other cheek with the other side of his head before licking her chin. He turned on her lap in circles, "making biscuits" as he purred and pushed her blanket around with his big paws until he had a nice, comfortable nest which he curled up in. He meowed in that gravelly, rough voice one more time before resting his head over her hand so she could scratch his chin. He purred in appreciation when she complied.

Smiling down at him, Juliana sat there scratching his chin until he drifted to sleep then rubbed and caressed the back of his big head. She tried to ignore the fact that she needed to pee as he slept peacefully in her lap.

Finally, after a half hour or so, he raised his head, meowed again, stood, and stretched. He bashed her in the cheeks a time or two then leapt gracefully to the railing, using her bladder as a convenient launching pad. He meowed once more and then was gone. Juliana sped into the house to pee before she wet her pants.

When she returned to wash the dishes, she realized she'd left the screen open when she heard the cat meow again. He greeted her as he leapt onto the kitchen counter, bashing his face against her shoulder as she watched him in amusement and scratched his chin.

"You're a pushy guy, aren't you?" she murmured, smiling when he purred in ecstasy and meowed in affirmation.

His ear was torn up on one edge, but otherwise, he looked to be in good health. She imagined he must make the rounds of the neighborhood and decided to ask about him when she visited the neighbors that morning.

Bill and Gladys Hawkins had owned the house next door for many years and moved there permanently after Mr. Hawkins had retired from his job in San Antonio. They'd watched Juliana and Allen and their various siblings grow into adulthood over the years. It had been much too long since her last visit. Allen had said he would let them know Juliana was on her way out, so they could look out for her since she was staying there alone.

After putting the cat outside, she closed the screen door. She started the shower and gave it a chance to run for a little while, thankful she'd remembered to turn the water heater on when she'd gotten there in the middle of the night. Once undressed, she stepped into the shower and was startled when she heard the cat in the house again.

"Dang it, how are you getting inside?"

"Meow!"

"You'd better not spray in this house, you hear me? My Aunt Vi will *kill* me if you do!"

The cat came in the bathroom and hopped up on the toilet seat and sat there watching her through the transparent shower curtain.

"Did you figure out how to get Happy's doggy door open?"

"Meow."

She washed her hair, keeping an eye on him, but he just sat there watching her and eventually curled up on the toilet seat. The nausea she'd experienced earlier had faded, but as her mind wandered back over the last day, the sadness she felt was suffocating. She was dressed and toweling her hair dry when her depressing thoughts were interrupted by a voice at the back door.

"Knock-knock!"

“Just a second!” The cat followed her to the kitchen as she went to the back door and greeted Mrs. Hawkins.

“Honey! It is so good to see you!” The older woman greeted her with a hug after Juliana opened the screen and welcomed her inside.

“It’s good to see you too, Gladys. Where’s Bill?”

“When Allen called us last night and told us you were coming, Bill decided that you might like to go for a ride like we used to. He’s getting the boat cleaned up and gassed right now. I came over to see if you’d like to do that. Are you okay, honey? You look tired. Uh-oh, I see that old toot has laid claim to you,” she said, squatting down to pet the cat’s head. He ran right to her.

“Is he yours?”

“No. He’s laid claim to the whole neighborhood. He roams at will. Bill is mad at me over him right now, actually, Old Charmer.” Gladys scratched his chin, and he purred loudly then twined himself around her ankles, nibbling on her toe lightly and making the older woman giggle.

“Why is Bill mad at you over a cat?”

“Bill found the bag of dry cat food I had stashed in the pantry. I’ve been feeding him, like several of the other neighbors who have cats. That’s why he’s so healthy looking. We’re all feeding him. I haven’t seen any pests since he’s been around, and I figure I might as well make him welcome if he’s performing a community service.

“Speaking of community service.” Gladys chuckled as she lifted his floppy, purring body into her arms then lifted his tail, “I’ve been thinking about having him neutered but...” She looked into his big, green eyes and let him bash her in the cheek with his head. “I haven’t had the heart. Being the man about town is part of his charm, you know? Plus, it won’t stop him from marking his territory. He’s too old. There is a whole new generation of big, charcoal-grey tomcats that are kittens right now. Many in the neighborhood would be happy to see him go, but I think he’s just so sweet, don’t you?”

The cat looked over at Juliana and meowed softly as if to say, “Who loves you, baby?” and rubbed her hand when she scratched under his chin again.

“He likes you, Juliana! So tell me how you’re doing. It’s been ages since we saw you.”

Juliana fixed her a cup of coffee and sat down for a talk with Gladys, skimming over more recent developments and generally convincing Gladys that she was fine and merely in need of some rest and relaxation. Bill came and collected his wife a while later, greeting her happily.

Juliana agreed to a boat ride later that day, after she’d had a chance to get settled, agreeing to come over when she was ready. After the Hawkinses departed, she unpacked and then lay down on the bed, hoping to relax a bit. Juliana loved the Hawkinses, but she needed a little more time to unwind before she had to pretend to be okay for them. She closed her eyes, facing the feelings she’d had to stuff down earlier.

What was she going to do?

She had gotten to a point in her life where she was ready for a change. She’d felt brave, and that had been due to her time spent with Ash. He’d made her feel good about taking chances, where before she’d just wanted the status quo. Status quo was how she’d managed to bob along with old what’s-his-face for as long as she had. She didn’t want that any longer.

But now, taking chances might have to be left behind in favor of maintaining a little stability. It crushed her heart to think of having a baby at this point in her life. She’d hoped to leave the job behind before she had kids because she knew if she continued working in her current position that she’d hardly ever see her baby.

Her savings were substantial, but she’d have to keep working to put a roof over their heads. The thought of a daycare worker being the one to see her child’s first step and to hear his or her first word was the thought that put her over the edge as the dam burst on her tears.

The betrayal she felt was like an anvil on her heart as she remembered watching him be drawn onto the dance floor and the proprietary way in which one of them had removed his hat and put it on her own head. The tears flowed and sobs broke from her as she remembered the cold way he'd pulled back from her and used her name instead of any of the familiar endearments she'd become so comfortable with.

Juliana woke later when her stomach rumbled. Judging by how the light had changed, she must have slept a few hours. When she glanced up at the clock, she was surprised to see that the cat had hopped up on the bed and curled himself into a little ball, sleeping up against her. She made a mental note to figure out how he was getting in the house. He woke when she patted him and came to her, loving on her cheeks and her hands some more.

"You know, you remind me of someone I know. Or thought I knew. Turns out he was a tomcat, too. Maybe I should call you Ashes since you're such a pretty, dark grey color. Would you like that?"

"Meow." Bash on the cheek.

"Ashes it is, then."

"Meow." Bash on the chin.

"I'm hungry. Let's make some lunch."

It was after one o'clock when she put the washed dishes in the drainer, put on her shoes, and locked up the house. She went around to the Hawkinses' back door, and Ashes was hot on her heels until he saw Bill. The cat beat a hasty retreat, stopping to look back at Juliana, seeming to wink at her before he disappeared through the hedge, purring.

"I think you've found a lifelong friend there, Juliana," Bill said. "Any chance you'd take him with you when you go back home?"

"Oh, I don't know, Bill. I'm not home much. It would be cruel to have a pet like him cooped up in the house all day long. I couldn't give him the care and attention with the kinds of hours I have to work." She grinned at him and added, "Nice try, though."

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“I guess he’s claimed me.”

“Do us all a favor and claim him right back?”

“Bill, will you stop!” Gladys said, trying to hide her laughter behind an admonishing tone. “The poor girl just got here.”

The Hawkinses were thoughtful and seemed to sense her quiet mood and so didn’t press her too much during the boat ride, letting her enjoy the cool, quiet afternoon. They fished for a little while, but nothing was biting, so they rode over to a restaurant that had a boat dock and had supper together.

The water was peaceful in the canal as Bill motored down to his boat dock and lift. He helped the girls from the boat, and then they helped him get it secured and winched back out of the water.

Juliana felt better for having been in the company of good friends, and being out on the water always helped her to feel loose and relaxed. She was pleasantly surprised that the motion of the boat over the water had not bothered her stomach at all, especially after eating, and for that she was especially grateful.

After thanking them for dinner and hugging them both good night, Juliana walked back to the house. She unlocked the back door and reached inside to flip on the light.

* * * *

Exhausted, dirty, and utterly spent, Ash finally pulled next to the curb in front of the house Allen had given him directions to. Seeing her white Camaro parked in the drive filled him with a mix of jubilation and humility. He had some explaining to do.

Getting out, he went to the front door and knocked. No one answered. He knocked a couple more times. Maybe she’d gone out with friends for supper. He climbed in his truck and rode back into Rockport. He picked up supper and brought it back to eat so he could be there when she got home. It was nearly twilight, and she still

wasn't there when he returned, so he lowered the windows and ate his take-out supper.

After he'd eaten his sandwich, he put his seat back and pulled his hat down to cover his eyes. He nodded off for a while, keeping an ear open for sounds of her return. He awoke to the strangest sensation tickling his fingers. He reached up to tilt his hat back on his head and looked into the eyes of the biggest damn tomcat he'd ever seen.

"Well, hello, big fella. Who might you be?" he murmured, allowing the cat to continue licking his fingers. He must have smelled Ash's food and jumped in the truck to investigate. "You're a big old boy, aren't you?"

"Meow." The cat climbed in his lap and rubbed his face against Ash's fingers then bumped his chest with the side of his head.

"You marking your territory? You're doing a better job than I've done."

"Meow." The cat rubbed the side of his head against Ash's jaw and turned to be petted.

"You know any pretty, redheaded city girls staying around here?" Ash asked, making conversation with the tom as he rubbed against his chest over and over again. He placed his paws on Ash's shoulder and rubbed his face against Ash's cheek, and Ash detected a faint trace of Juliana's perfume.

"Ah-hah. You've been making time with my woman, haven't you?"

"Meow." The cat bashed his cheek again. Yes, that was Juliana's scent. He noticed a light come on inside her house. Relief raced through him, chased by trepidation. He knew from checking in with Teresa that Juliana had not called in and had left her phone turned off, as she said she would. She had no idea what had transpired in the last twenty-four hours. When she set eyes on him, she'd probably be ready to tell him off but good.

From the back of the house, a voice he loved called out, "Ashes!"

The cat leapt gracefully across him and out of the truck window, streaking across the lawn around to the back of the house.

“Looks like she’s got you properly trained. Maybe I should take a few lessons, cat.”

He paused as he reached for the door handle. She called the cat *Ashes*?

* * * *

The cat streaked in through the screen door, meowing and fussing like he hadn’t seen her in a week. He rubbed against her legs and stretched up to make biscuits against her butt like she’d brought him supper.

She chuckled. “You big brownnoser, what makes you think I have food for you?”

“Meeow!” he yowled as she opened the bag that contained dry cat food Gladys had given her, to get Bill off of her back. Juliana put the bowl of food on the floor by the back door, and Ashes ran to it and got busy. She frowned when the doorbell rang, knowing the Hawkinses would both come to the back door as was their custom. She went to the door thinking it must be another neighbor coming by to check on her.

Turning on more lights as she walked through the house, she was unprepared to open the door and see Ash Peterson, hat in hand, standing on the porch. She was speechless. He chewed on his lip, either searching for the right words to say, or waiting for her to say something. She wasn’t sure which.

Chapter Twenty-two

Ash figured it might be best to let her say whatever she needed to say right from the beginning. Not allowing her to say her piece was what got him into trouble yesterday, so he would allow her to say or do whatever she needed.

Juliana looked beautiful, dressed in a white, long-sleeved top that hugged all her pretty curves just right, revealing a hint of her luscious cleavage. He couldn't stop it when his cock tingled. He took a calming breath because he thought she might not take too kindly to seeing him with a hard-on when he still had explaining to do.

She opened the screen door and stepped out, allowing it to swing closed behind her. She crossed her arms, unknowingly pressing her breasts up, then he noticed the snug, super-faded blue jeans she had on and her bare feet.

Damn, but she was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen. His dick would've barked and howled if it had been capable. He was such a horn-dog for her. She gave him the once-over and glared at him venomously when she noticed the pronounced bulge at his groin. That seemed to jump-start her mouth because her lips popped open, and she sputtered for at least ten seconds before she finally got some traction.

"You've got a lot of nerve showing up here, Ash Peterson. Everything I needed to know I heard and saw yesterday and last night. You were right. There's no commitment between us, and maybe I *don't* know you as well as I thought I did. You got over the disappointment of my news pretty quickly, judging by how fast you were able to get up to The Dancing Pony last night, to avail yourself

of no less than *four* obviously willing women.” She poked him in the chest with a fingertip.

“I don’t know why you’re here. You said everything you needed to say when you cut me to the bone yesterday at the ranch.” She pushed him backward off the porch, and he didn’t offer her any resistance. He felt like he owed her. She batted against his chest with her balled-up little fist. If she wanted to get a few licks in, as well, the good Lord knew he deserved those, too.

He let her pummel him, staying close enough that, if she lost her balance lashing out, he could catch her. “I can’t imagine what more you might have to say that would make it worth it to you to make the long drive out here. You are cruel, unfaithful, irresponsible, pushy, and just plain mean! What the *hell* is that *smell*? And why are you so filthy?”

Backing away and leaving wasn’t an option. This was his one chance. “I broke down last night on my way here. Between Ashburn and Wilton. I had to walk back to Ashburn for a mechanic, in the rain. I had to walk through some low-water crossings. The water must have been full of that stuff they spread on the fields out here. I know I stink to high heaven. I must look like a drowned rat. I’ve been trying to call you since I got back on the road this afternoon. It took that long to get my truck’s generator replaced.”

A light came on next door, and the front door opened. A man poked his head out and called to her, “You okay, honey?”

She turned to the neighbor and waved in a friendly fashion. “I’m fine, Bill. This is someone from Divine. Thanks again for supper.”

The man nodded and frowned at Ash before going back inside. Another light came on, on the other side. He was grateful that she had people looking out for her.

She beckoned to him as she waved at that neighbor, too. “Come on inside before someone thinks I’m being accosted by a transient. But leave your damn boots on the porch. Don’t say a word. I’m not

ready to listen. Your clothes are as bad as your boots. Come with me.”

He followed her through the house to a bathroom down the hall. Ashes meowed to him in friendly fashion as he passed the kitchen.

“There are towels in the linen closet. Put all your clothes on the floor in the hallway here. I’ll wash them for you because that cannot possibly be healthy to be wearing something that smells that bad. You’re about the same size as my uncle, Charlie. I’ll put a change of clothes on the counter for you. Take a shower and then we’ll talk.”

Her eyes flashed blue fire at him as she glowered and poked his chest again. “And don’t for one second think you are even close to being off the hook, you sorry bastard. Just because I’m willing to wash your clothes doesn’t mean I give a damn what you have to say, only that I’ll let you say it, and then you can drive your ass right back to Divine.”

He nodded and watched her shut the door, before unbuttoning his shirt. He allowed the smile to form on his lips once she was gone. Damn, but he loved her fiery spirit. His granite-hard cock agreed, judging by its long attention span. She was willing to hear him out. He’d explain, and Juliana would realize the misunderstanding. Then he’d throw himself upon her mercy.

He placed the clothes in a semi-damp pile on the floor in the hallway and groaned gratefully as he stepped into the steaming hot shower, leaving the bathroom door open for her.

When he was finished, he toweled off and found a terry cloth bathrobe lying on the counter. He slipped it on and ran his fingers through his hair to make it neat.

When he came into the living room, he heard noises in the kitchen. On silent feet, he approached across the tile floor.

“Meow.”

“I know, but I can’t take in a stray. You wouldn’t like it, anyway. You’d have to stay cooped up all day. I’d have to get you fixed, and you’d wind up miserable. Here you have freedom. At least until

someone takes you to the pound.” Ash frowned as he heard her small sob. His brows drew together, and his heart lurched a little at the sound.

“Meow.”

“No, Ashes. You’d wind up hating me for taking away your freedom. That’s what it all comes down to. You’re better off here. At my house, there’s no one cleaning fish for you to scavenge from, like there is here.”

“I’ll take him home with me, darlin’, if you want me to.”

Ash realized he’d startled her when she shifted against the cabinet and plopped hard on her ass, wincing when she hit bottom.

He hurried to her and squatted down to help her. “Darlin’, let me help you up.”

Her eyes rose to his and then traveled down his chest and below. She turned beet red and slid back from him. She literally hissed at him and pushed against his chest. “Don’t you call me darlin’. Just don’t. I’m not your darlin’, you asshole. You go over there and sit down. *Go*. Then you can say anything you need to say to me.” Her chin trembled and tears overflowed her eyes, which seemed to make her even angrier. She had a lot of pride and didn’t want him to see her cry. She snatched the box of Kleenex he located and handed to her, and then he did as she asked. He drew the too-small robe closed as best as he could.

“I’ve had some dumb moments in my life. Real dumb. But yesterday, I outdid myself. I’ve been desperate to reach you since yesterday evening. My head was so far up my ass I should’ve been able to see daylight every time I opened my mouth.”

Ashes the cat meowed and rubbed against her knees then nibbled on her chin. She didn’t say a word but allowed him to continue explaining, and he noticed the tears continued to flow. It made his heart clench to see her like this, so sad and angry.

“I told you someone overheard you, but what they heard they got completely wrong. I know I should not have trusted the source, either,

when compared with you. He probably enjoyed bringing me bad news. I wouldn't let you explain because I thought it would hurt less that way. That was dumb. I'd been hoping for the day you would tell me that you loved me. When that day came, I rejected you. I was as sorry as a man can possibly be, walking fifteen miles in the rain and wind last night. I've got nobody but myself to blame for that or what happened yesterday."

Ash heard a small gasp, but she said nothing, so he continued. "I thought you had come to tell me you were engaged to the man who gave you the ring in the restaurant. I thought *that* was your big news. And when you told me you loved me, I thought you were saying we could still have something together while you were married to him."

She gasped again, in outrage and surprise.

"Stupid. I know. The man is your cousin, and the ring is your grandmother's. I saw you slip it off when you came out to talk to me, and I assumed that was because you wouldn't want me to see it until you broke the news to me. You see, I had a ring in *my* pocket, too. I was planning on asking you to marry me yesterday. If I'd just let you explain, *trusting* that there was a misunderstanding somewhere, this would have all turned out different."

He looked up at her, but her head was in her hands. He didn't think she was quite ready for him to go to her yet. "Teresa explained it all to me. Then my sisters damn near beat me to death."

"Your sisters?"

"The women you saw me with at the club. If we'd been closer, you'd have seen the resemblance, not that it's any excuse. They'd decided to come out for a visit and surprise you with a welcome to the family bridal shower."

"Those were your sisters?"

"All you'd have to do is see them to know it. We all have the same color hair and eyes."

She lifted her head from her hands. "So you thought I was coming to tell you I was marrying another man?"

“Yeah.”

“And when you told me we had no commitments and that I should do what I needed to do you meant get married, not that I should have an abortion.”

“God no! Oh, Lord, no! No!” He lurched from the table, not caring that he cried or that he was on his knees in front of her, begging. He cupped her cheeks in his palms. “Juliana, please tell me you didn’t.”

Tears flowed from her eyes, and she sniffled. “We could go for the world record for most serious misunderstandings in one day, couldn’t we?” she said and smiled through her tears. “No, Ash. I was having this baby, no matter what you thought I should do. But you can see how I would’ve thought that, right?”

Ash nodded mutely, wiping the heels of his hand across his eyes before wiping her own tears. She allowed him to lift her from the floor, and he carried her into the living room to one of the huge, comfortable-looking, overstuffed chairs in the corner.

“Your cousin was ready to kick my ass,” he said, cupping her cheek in his palm, feathering in the strands of auburn hair that framed her face.

“I know. He told me when I let him know I was coming out here. I told him not to.”

“Will you forgive me for ruining your moment and not letting you tell your news? Knowing what I know now, I can’t believe I said things that would hurt you so much. I’m sorry for being such an asshole. You must have been excited and nervous, and then I shut you down like that. I hurt you when you reached out to me. You want to beat on me some more?”

“No, but I reserve the right to revisit that option later. So you drove all night?”

“Until my truck broke down in the middle of nowhere.”

“Where is Ashburn?”

“I took a shortcut through Ashburn and Wilton.”

“Oh, that’s no shortcut. You got all turned around in the highway construction, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t until this afternoon once I was back on the road. I realized it didn’t take any time off of the drive and cost me the rest of the night. I’d have been here at five o’clock this morning if I’d followed Allen’s directions. Nice guy, by the way. Is he the one that taught you to dance?”

“Yeah. He’s a great guy and very protective.”

“I know that now. Got a lot to thank him for. So, you’re carrying my baby, huh?” The shaky quality of his voice touched her heart.

“Yes, Ash.”

“You’re going to marry me, right?”

She scoffed and drilled him with her wolf-blue eyes. “Not if that’s the best you can do for a fricking marriage proposal.”

He lifted her out of his lap and sat her in the chair and knelt right there on one knee and took her hand.

“Juliana Meyer, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Make me the happiest man in the world and become the mother of all our babies?”

“Yes, Ash. Now, get up because when you kneel like that, I can see all your goodies dangling,” she said, then let out an unladylike, snorting laugh.

“Oh, shit! The ring!” It was in his jeans.

“Is it still in your pocket?”

“Yeah.”

He followed her to the utility room and fished the jeans from the sudsy water. He checked both front pockets and found the ring.

“Pew! Those clothes may need a few washings.”

“That’s okay. I’ll go around naked for as long as you say to. Here it is, darlin’. Will you marry me?”

He slipped the diamond engagement ring on her finger, and she smiled happily then hugged him hard. He lifted her from the floor,

wrapping his arms gratefully around her curvy body and held her to him.

She sniffled and whispered, “I love you, Ash.”

He felt Ashes the cat bump against his bare ankle and meow. “I love you, too, darlin’.”

“And yes, I want you to take Ashes home with you, if it’s okay. He’d make an excellent barn cat.”

“Ashes?”

“Um, yeah.”

“This I gotta hear.”

Chapter Twenty-three

No fucking way was he wearing these god-awful things. Ash felt like he had nylon panties on. “Damn it, Juliana! They feel *weird!*”

“That’s because you’re used to blue jeans and underwear.”

“To hell with this! I’m wearing underwear with these.”

“No, you’re not. Come on. These are just basic swim trunks. Haven’t you ever owned a pair of these? It’ll be so much more comfortable. It will make me happy, too.”

“Shit.”

“What did you do when you went swimming back home? Didn’t you ever have swimming trunks?”

“No, like any red-blooded American boy, I wore cutoffs, *with underwear!*”

“Oh, brother. You’d think I was asking you to wear a man thong or something!”

“But I can feel a breeze.”

“They’ll dry faster, and you won’t chafe. You can’t wear your blue jeans to the beach. Here,” Juliana said as she cut the plastic tie-tag and handed him a pair of rubber flip-flops.

“Oh, no. Crap. I hate stuff between my toes.”

“It’s because you’re used to wearing boots. You look awesome,” she said, admiration in her voice. “Mmm, look at this tanned chest.” Ash was only slightly mollified as she sighed happily and ran her hand over his chest. “And that wonderfully tight ass. Speaking of asses...”

“Don’t. You’re already torturing me as it is. I don’t think anal sex is a good idea while you’re pregnant. And why aren’t you in your swimsuit yet?”

“Because I’m too busy harassing you. You look yummy. I’ll go change.”

Ash looked at himself in the dresser mirror in resignation. They’d gone to the Walmart in Rockport and picked up flip-flops and a pair of swim trunks for him because the weather had warmed up again. When he’d asked Juliana what she’d like to do today, she’d told him she wanted to play in the surf and fly a kite on the beach. The water was too cold, but the sun was out, and they could play on the sand and in the shallows.

The bathroom door opened, and she came back down the hallway. He turned to her and smiled as she modeled her suit for him. It was a pretty, silver one-piece swimsuit. The part he liked best about it was that the neckline plunged, showing off every single luscious inch of her silky cleavage. He had a love-hate relationship with the swimsuit, though.

“Do you think the beach will be crowded?”

“Oh, no. Not this time of year. We may even be the only ones out there.”

“Good.”

“What do you mean, *good*?”

“Because, darlin’, you look really sexy in that swimsuit. I don’t want you mad at me if I cover you with a T-shirt, nor do I want to get in any fights with strange men for ogling you.”

“Oh, puh-lease!”

“No, uh-uh. I’m not exaggerating. You look amazing. Perfect. Luscious.” As he said the words, he approached, his voice growing deeper and deeper. He smiled at her rosy blush and kissed her when she offered her lips to him.

“Fine. We’ll probably be alone, anyway.”

“Good, because I don’t want you covered up. You need sunscreen. Lots of sunscreen.”

Juliana giggled and said, “You do, too, on those lily-white legs,” and scampered out of his reach.

They cruised down to the beach in his truck, and sure enough, there was hardly anybody down there. Ash removed the intricate dragon kite they’d painstakingly assembled at the house, out of the backseat. The long tails were picked up by the wind currents as they fell to the sand from the truck cab.

Juliana helped him straighten it out. “You know, I would have settled for the *My Little Pony* kite.”

“Uh-uh. Go big or go home, right?”

They straightened it out and had it up in the air a moment later, the red and purple dragon spinning, flying, and fluttering in an outrageous display of color. They stayed on the beach for two hours, flying the kite, looking for seashells, and building a sandcastle. Another family gravitated toward them on the lonely beach, the two preschoolers fascinated by the large, intricate, and colorful kite. The children squealed and clapped their hands when Ash maneuvered it and made it dance up and down and spin for them in different directions. When it was time to get the fair-skinned Juliana back indoors, they parted company with the family, leaving the kite in the capable hands of the children’s father. The two little boys squealed happily when Ash told them they could have the kite, and they ran up and hugged both Ash and Juliana’s legs and thanked them.

Ash walked with Juliana on the beach, their arms around each other, taking their time. He reached out a hand and slid it over her abdomen.

“I can’t even tell you’re expecting my baby. How do you feel?”

“I feel good, Ash. But this explains why I was so exhausted.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to do about the store?”

She smiled happily. “Yeah. Each time I’ve had to take off, for whatever reason, I’ve come back to find the store in good shape,

running like it should. There are imperfections but nothing that can't be fixed. Leah is in a perfect place right now, and I think she'll be ready to take over in a month or so. What would you think about me resigning from the store in May and taking a little time off, looking into the opportunity at Discretion and see how things work out? I want to focus on us and the baby."

Feeling sappy and love-struck, Ash said, "I think that sounds perfect. You don't have to work if you don't want to. I can support this family. Soon we'll have the foreman's house, but if you want to, we can buy land and build our own place. You take all the time off you need. I want you happy, and I want to take care of you, like you deserve."

"I love you, Ash."

"I love you, darlin'," he murmured and brushed her hair away as it fluttered against her cheek and kissed her.

Epilogue

Ash sat beside his *very* pregnant wife on the couch, lifted her swollen feet into his lap, and rubbed them soothingly. His mom and sisters had warned him about pregnancy hormones early on. He was an A-plus student at mastering the two key phrases for solving all problems and getting out of trouble, “I’m sorry” and “You’re right,” and he employed them liberally.

Truth be told, apart from a few crying spells, which he really couldn’t blame her for, she did pretty well. Besides pain and stiffness in her lower back, her worst complaint had been her appearance. She felt like a whale, and she was self-conscious of her body, especially when she was naked.

Ash figured he was better off putting his feelings to work to show her how he felt about her appearance. He looked upon her expanding midsection with admiration and amazement, not with alarm like a lot of men did. It blew him away that she was willing to go through this for his son. Ash could stare at her shifting belly for hours, and his hands never strayed far from her when he was near. The first time the baby had pushed a little foot against his palm, he’d cried sappy tears.

“Look at these pretty little toenails. How was the morning at the spa?”

“It was awesome. Kerry got me all relaxed and worked out all my sore and stiff spots,” she murmured with a sigh as he lifted a foot and sucked a cute little toe into his mouth and suckled on it, making her moan in pleasure. “Baby.”

“Mmm-hmm,” he murmured in a sexy, assenting tone as he moved to the next toe. He loved being able to help her relax and feel

good. Allowing it to pop from his lips, he asked, “What did the doctor tell you?”

“Mmmm, to be patient for a few more days. Emma told me there was something we could do that was safe and effective and might encourage Will to get the show on the road.”

“What’s that?” he asked as he nuzzled her instep with his lips, making her shiver and giggle in response.

“Sex, lots of sex. Orgasms and semen both can bring on contractions. We won’t be able to have sex until six weeks after he arrives, and so she says that we should have lots of sex.”

“That’s her professional diagnosis? Lots of sex?” His dick hardened enthusiastically at the thought.

“Yep.”

“I think we should follow doctor’s orders. You feel up to this?”

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about it all day, and I’m more than ready. I’m practically horny.” She giggled as he helped her rise from the couch and put his arm around her and helped her back to the bedroom. Though Juliana had struggled with feeling unsexy and had been downright uncomfortable the last few weeks, it hadn’t stopped her from getting creative with him.

He helped her undress, one article of clothing at a time, starting with her pants. She hated the way she looked in them, so he got them out of the way fast. Then he undid the buttons of her top. He kissed her belly as he moved higher and higher then hummed in appreciation as he nuzzled her fragrant cleavage. He slipped her panties from her hips and unclasped her bra, then spent a minute tonguing the velvety undersides of her now fuller, lush breasts. He grinned as he felt his son kick against his cheek where it lay on top of her belly. She smiled lovingly at him, and he nuzzled her belly with his lips on the spot that moved.

As he unbuttoned his shirt and toed his boots off, he kissed her tenderly, careful to not to bump her belly. She pushed his shirt from his shoulders as he unbuckled his belt, removed his blue jeans and his

boxers. Soon he was as naked as she was, and they stood kissing in the dim lamplight, their bodies pressed against each other.

Her doubts about her beauty had grown with each new pound and every new inch, and she wondered what she'd be like after the baby came. He reassured her every chance he got, but he felt the best way was to show her with the way he loved her. Ash had become a foreplay connoisseur, doing research and trying it all out on her to see what she liked best. Juliana promised him his instincts were great. He knew what she liked and for how long and where, and in the process, he'd developed an even greater love for her incredible body. She'd told him several times that it was hard to feel unbeautiful and unsexy in the face of such love and devotion.

He helped her lie down and get comfortable with a pillow propped behind her back so that she wasn't flat but not completely on her side either.

"So, you've thought about making love all day, darlin'?"

"Yes, all day long."

"Is your pussy throbbing right now? Are you wet for me?"

"Yes, very wet. Thinking about your loving right now is making me clench."

"Good." He stroked her nipples with his tongue, sucking them into turgid little peaks. He could taste the barest hint of her early milk, and delighted in the rich sweetness. She moaned in pleasure, her thighs scissoring against each other.

Ash kissed her shoulder and beyond, his lips gliding down to the inner curve of her elbow then down to her wrist before sucking on one or two of her fingers. He pressed his lips to her hip, and he kissed and licked under the curve of her belly, causing her to sigh in pleasure and sink her fingertips into his hair. He slid his fingers across her mound and around to her other hipbone. His goal was never to tease or torment her to greater heights, but merely for her to feel his love and desire for her pleasure.

Gazing into her eyes, hoping she could see the love he felt for her in his own, he lifted her uppermost thigh and laid it over his shoulder so that she did not need to hold it up with her own strength. Over the months, Juliana had learned to truly relax and let him do this for her, and he always took his time. With her satiny thigh draped over his shoulder, he wrapped a forearm around her thigh and gently parted her lips to suckle at her ripe, slick flesh. He felt her pussy quiver under his tongue as he laved her slit, and she moaned in need.

Gently, he latched on to her clit and began the slow sucking, tugging motion on it that she loved, drawing out each stroke in the way she favored. Releasing her thigh and holding her lips open with the other hand, he stroked her cunt with a fingertip. Her pussy lips were swollen and throbbing, and he could tell by her sounds that her need for penetration grew.

“Darlin’, you know I’m not trying to tease you or make you beg. In a few months maybe, but not now. I want your orgasm to be good, so you let me know when you can’t take anymore stroking, and I’ll give it to you.”

With a chuckle and in a shaky voice, Juliana said, “Ash, you are so good to me, the most wonderful man in the world.”

“It’s a burden,” Ash said with a chuckle but smiled in satisfaction that Juliana was able to let go enough in her state to receive pleasure from him like this. She sounded like she was close.

He wasn’t above resorting to sex toys to pleasure her, either, and had several that really seemed to do it for her, even in advanced pregnancy. She’d once told him that the sensation of just one finger sliding into her pussy, seeking and finding all the right spots, was one of the sweetest things he did for her. She said it showed that he cared because it often took her longer to climax than before. He always took his time pleasuring her that way as he did now. This wasn’t just about finding release today. It was about building a love with her that would last a lifetime. He wanted her to look back on this time and have memories of tender loving and pleasure while expecting his son and

not just the recollection of the discomforts. He was a total sap for her and proud of it.

“Oh, yes, Ash. Just like that,” she whispered languidly, her head thrown back on the pillow, her now longer auburn hair in wild disarray over their pillows. She massaged and traced her hands over his shoulders and the back of his neck. He murmured in appreciation over her pussy, the vibrations stealing her breath away. He stroked and suckled her into a gentle orgasm.

After she was finished, he slid the little egg vibrator onto his finger and put it on its lowest setting. She loved when he fucked her with his cock and slid a vibrating finger over her clit. He removed the pillow and angled in behind her, sliding her uppermost thigh to rest comfortably over his. He clasped his fingers with hers and nuzzled the nape of her neck as his cock slid along her slit, coating it with her arousal before finding her swollen, pulsing cunt and sliding in a little at a time.

“Yes, Ash. That’s perfect. It feels so good.”

He cuddled her to him. “Ready to play?”

She chuckled sexily and replied, “Yes, honey. Let’s play.”

He thrust in a small motion as his vibrating finger slid slowly over her hip. It never ceased to amaze them that whenever he did this, Will settled down while they made love. He could kick like crazy while Ash licked her pussy or used his fingers, but the moment his son felt the subtle vibrations, he always quieted down, which he obligingly did now. She sighed with pleasure as his fingers slid over her wet inner lips, finding her clit. She moaned and flexed slightly against him, and he felt her pussy spasm around his cock. His fingers slid through a fresh rush of her juices, and he growled in appreciation at her response. He kept his strokes gentle but firm, the way she liked it.

“It’s close, Ash, so close. You feel so good,” she whispered in encouragement. Her sounds became throatier, and she grasped at him as her body released another rush of moisture. He wondered if she was holding back on purpose as her tension continued to grow.

Normally, she would have had her release by now. He stroked her labia with his fingers and suckled at the flesh of her neck.

“You feel so good, darlin’. Your pussy is so warm and slick, taking my cock so sweetly. I’ll never be able to get enough, I swear.” He flexed behind her, thrusting his cock into her wet heat over and over, feeling his control unravel a bit but never unleashing his full force.

“More, Ash. I want more. Yes! Yes, honey. It’s perfect. Oh, here it comes!” She sobbed as her body clenched on his, her pussy milking his cock like a fist as a strong orgasm rippled through her body. Crying out in ecstasy, her hips ground against his. Her pulsing orgasm quickly set off his release, and he growled deeply as he thrust in firm, short strokes, filling her pussy with stream after hot stream of his cum.

“Yes, honey. Fill me. Give me your cum,” she whispered dreamily.

One of the nice things about that position was that if they were covered up and comfortable afterward, she would fall asleep with his cock still fully sheathed in her pussy. He loved the feel of her, reclining against him like this, her swollen belly nestling his son mere inches from his hand and his cock buried inside her. She’d told him she loved it, too.

Ash pulled the blankets over them and tucked them around her. She rested her head on his shoulder so he could nuzzle her with his lips and nose as much as he wanted. He heard a gravelly meow as Ashes wandered into the bedroom. The purring cat leapt onto the bed and rubbed against Ash’s hand on her belly. He carefully rubbed the side of his head back and forth over her blanket-covered abdomen, purring against her belly and quieting Will as he began to kick again. Ashes then curled up into a big, grey ball beside her.

“You came hard tonight,” he murmured as she pressed her backside against him.

“I did. It was perfect. Thank you so much, Ash. A woman never felt more beautiful or loved than I do. I hope you know how much I adore you.”

“I do, darlin’.”

Juliana stroked his hand where it rested on the side of her abdomen. “Emma said it may take a few tries to get the party started.”

“Just tell me when you want it, and my cock is all yours, darlin’. I want you to rest for now. We can try again in the morning if you want.”

Chuckling, she said, “Oh, I’ll want to, I’m sure. Will is a sweet, loving boy just like his daddy. He won’t keep me waiting too long.”

And he didn’t. Ash and Juliana welcomed him into the world the very next day.

THE END

WWW.HEATHERRAINIER.COM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Rainier lives and writes in South Central Texas. Her stories offer up the content of her fantasies, with autobiographical humor, triumph, and tragedy mixed in. With great pride, Heather writes erotic romances exclusively for Siren Publishing under their Ménage Everlasting and Everlasting Classic imprints.

Heather's love of romance fiction began as a teenager when her mom gave her copies of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* and Bertrice Small's *Skye O'Malley*. To this day she's pretty sure that was her mom's version of the "birds and the bees" talk.

Heather writes the type of novel she loves to read: more erotic and edgy than the mainstream, with plenty of sweet romance mixed in and a happily ever after guaranteed. Heather's favorite type of hero is the gentle, lovable giant, but readers will discover a wide variety of heroes and alphas on the pages of her novels, from nearly perfect to very flawed. Heather hopes that readers relate to her heroines and the challenges and dilemmas they face head-on.

Heather believes that life doesn't always present love to us in neat little sanitized packages. Sometimes we have to seize the day, live life with no regrets, forget the past, never give up, learn to trust, and dare to live, even in outrageous circumstances. Those themes are woven throughout her Divine Creek Ranch Collection, which debuted in November of 2010.

When not happily typing at her keyboard, Heather is usually busy corralling her kids, volunteering at local schools, or loving on her smokin' hot husband, who thankfully loves to cook.

Also by Heather Rainier

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Everlasting Classic: Divine Creek Ranch 2: *Her Gentle Giant, Part 1:*
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