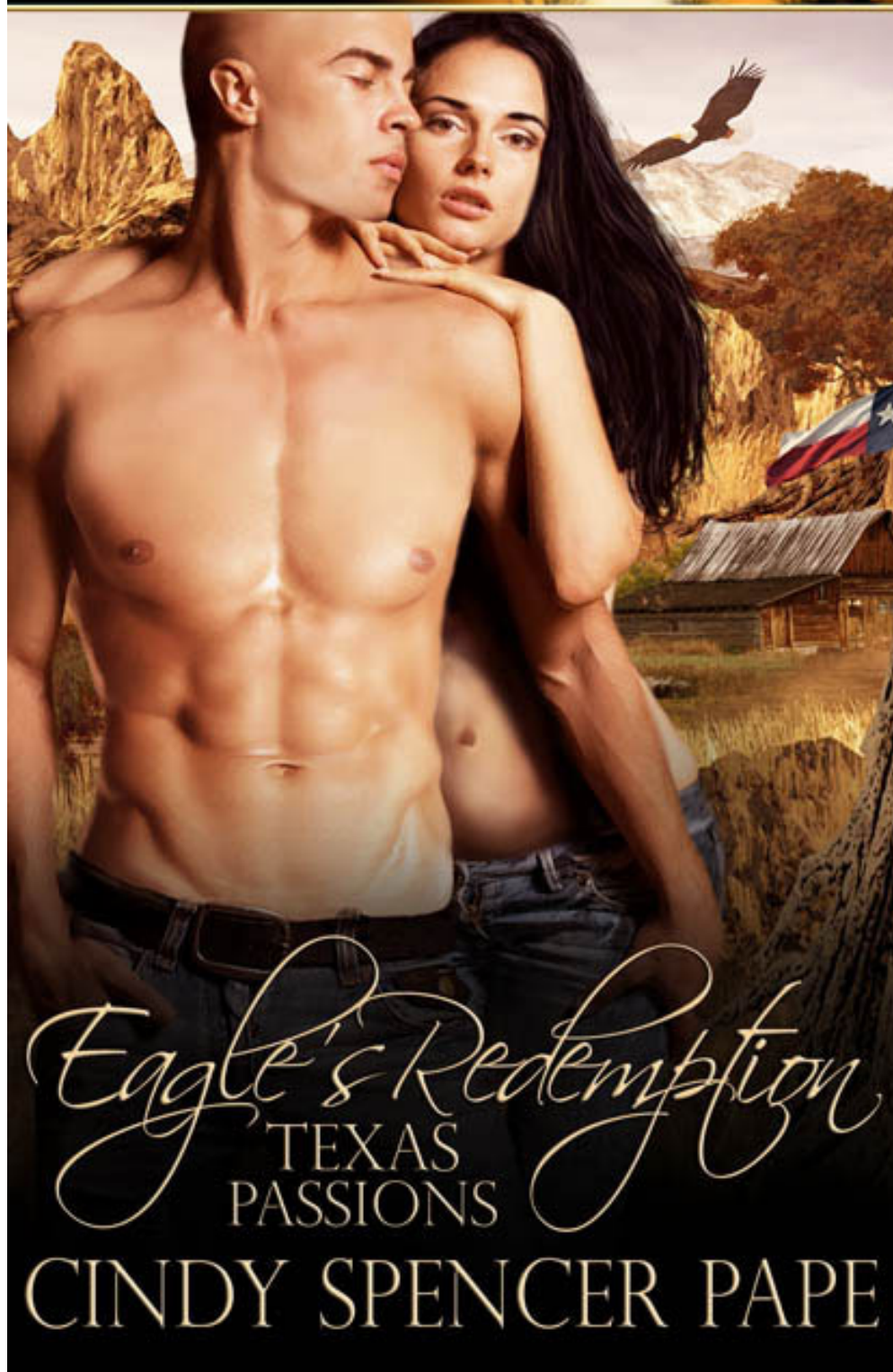


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



Eagle's Redemption

Cindy Spencer Pape

Book two in the Texas Passions series.

Dash Hyde is a former Chicago cop, scarred both inside and out. When he inherits a share in a Texas ranch, the last thing he expects is to meet a woman who can see past the scars to his very soul—even though she's nearly blind.

Carmen Whitefeather loves taking care of wildlife, but the damaged man she finds on her doorstep with an injured eagle fascinates her even more. The spark between them is instant and overwhelming, and she's determined to enjoy every second.

As Carmen and Dash explore the passion they find in each other's arms, they both take the risk of getting burned. When an old enemy of Dash's targets Carmen, Dash will have to face his deepest fears and walk into the flames to fight for the woman he loves.

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Eagle's Redemption

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EAGLE'S REDEMPTION

Cindy Spencer Pape

Dedication

For animal rehabilitation staff and volunteers across the country, who work tirelessly to help undo the damage done by other humans to the creatures who share our planet. You get bitten, scratched, pooped on, peed on and puked on, and you still keep on going, even when funding is cut to zero. You're all heroes in my book.

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Chapter One

"Is that an eagle?" The Texas sun beat down on the back of Dashiel Hyde's neck, and he wiped his forehead with a bandana as he looked up at the sky. Then he lifted his almost-new black Stetson hat and wiped his shaved head as well. Moose, his big brown quarter horse, shifted slightly between his legs, forcing him to grip with his thighs to hold on, which hurt. Even after being here three months, he still didn't quite have the hang of riding. The heat was taking some adjustment too—and it was only May, so it was about to get a whole lot hotter.

"Nope. Vulture," his half brother Mac Moreno noted. Mac's dark, Hispanic complexion was as beaded with sweat as Dash's own. "See how the wings sort of make the shape of an M? Eagles' wings curve up, more like a U." The two men were riding fence lines in the northern pasture, checking for any broken spots in the barbed wire where the cattle might slip through. Dash had thought he knew all about fences, growing up dirt-poor on Chicago's south side. There had been plenty of fences, most enclosing small spaces and designed to keep kids like Dash out, but here—here the damn things were put up to keep the cows in, and they ran literally for miles. The vastness of it all still blew his mind. Nothing but green as far as the eye could see, dotted only here and there by trees or cattle. Shaking his head yet again, he nudged his horse into motion, following his brother.

Though Mac ran a bar for a living, he was at home in the saddle, making Dash feel even greener. If his buddies on the Chicago police force could see him now, they'd be laughing their asses off. Still, he'd been coming to grips with the idea of living in Texas, and of having two more half siblings, ones a lot closer to his own thirty-five years than his mom and stepdad's kids in Illinois. He still wasn't sure how he felt about the father who had left him one third of the White Eagle Ranch. The gesture might have meant a

whole hell of a lot more if Joe Morgan had bothered to contact Dash even once while he was still alive.

"Hey, I got a postcard from Leah and Shane today," Mac said. "Sounds like they're enjoying Hawaii."

"Hell, I was surprised they even left their hotel room," Dash said with a rueful grin. At Mac's raised eyebrow he shrugged. "I got one too." Their half sister Leah had just gotten married to Shane Duffy, the local vet. Of Joe Morgan's three kids, Leah was the only one who'd been legitimate and had grown up on the ranch, so she was their unofficial leader. After she'd been hurt a few months back, Mac and Dash had stepped up and pitched in to keep the ranch going, just as they were now that she was on her honeymoon.

"Well, they'll be home in a week," Mac said. "Guess we'd better be able to tell Leah these fences are all in top condition, right?"

Dash chuckled. Their little sister was a perfectionist when it came to the ranch. "You said it." He clicked his tongue, urging his horse to a faster pace.

Mac laughed. "Yeah, city boy, we're gonna make a cowboy out of you yet."

* * * * *

Carmen Whitefeather hummed an aria along with the CD player as she stirred the pot of chili on her stove. It was hotter than hell tonight and she'd planned to eat leftover salad for dinner, but for some reason she'd gotten the urge to cook. The scents of browning beef, onions, chili peppers and garlic filled the air of her cabin. She'd just finished shredding a couple of carrots, a nontraditional ingredient but one that would add both a touch of sweetness and some extra nutrition to the sauce, when Silverfoot stirred from his rug in the corner of the kitchen and started to whine loudly enough to be heard over the blaring stereo.

"What is it, boy?" She'd talked to her grandfather not half an hour ago on the phone and her cousin Leah was in Hawaii on her honeymoon. Nobody else ever stopped by

Carmen's snug little cabin tucked into the hills. Nonetheless, there was a sharp rap on the door, and Silver barked loudly in response.

"Just a minute," she called. With a sigh, Carmen checked the heat on the stove, set down her spoon and picked up her glasses. Even with them, she couldn't see much, but they'd let her make out the general size and shape of her visitor. Moving by memory, she crossed the open main room of her cabin to the front door with Silver's nails clattering on the wood floor right beside her. Her unofficial leader dog, the big shepherd-wolf hybrid followed her pretty much everywhere she went.

"Hello," she said, tilting her head up at the face of the man who stood on her porch. It was way up, and though she couldn't quite make out his features, she recognized his voice as soon as he spoke.

The voice was deep and gravelly with a sexy rasp. "Hi. I'm Dash—Dashiel Hyde, Leah's...brother. We met at her wedding. Your grandfather told me you might be able to help me out."

"Hi, Dash." Oh yeah, she remembered him. Just one dance at Leah's wedding and she'd practically begged him to take her home and fuck her—all that hard muscle and the musky, masculine scent of him when she'd had her cheek pressed against his suit coat. Why the heck had Grandfather sent him here? "What can I do for you?"

"I found a bird," he said. "An eagle. I think it's been shot, but it's still alive. With Shane gone, I didn't know what else to do, so I called Ken."

Of course—she knew her grandfather Ken Nightwalker had taken the newcomer under his wing. "Come with me," she said, stepping out onto the porch with Silver close at her heels.

"He's in my car," Dash said. "I'll go get him."

She hadn't even heard a car, but then she'd had the stereo cranked pretty loudly. "The barn's right behind the cabin," she told him. "I'll meet you there." Gravel crunched beneath his feet as he strode off toward the driveway while she turned to

follow the well-worn path to her barn, one hand resting lightly on the top of Silver's head.

When she reached the barn, she flipped on the light switch then held the door for Dash, who'd caught right up with her, a large white container held cautiously in both hands. "Is that a laundry basket?" she asked, motioning him over to the stainless steel examining table her grandfather had installed for her to work on. About a third of the barn was sectioned off to make a big, open room with pine-paneled walls and a Saltillo-tiled floor. The worktable sat in the center.

"Yeah," he admitted somewhat sheepishly. "It was the only thing I had big enough. I bungee corded a piece of plywood over the top, just in case he got feisty."

"You think on your feet," she said, getting out antiseptic, gauze and tweezers, along with her big magnifying lens and a pair of leather welding gloves. "That's good. You said he was shot?"

"I was on my way back to my place when I heard the shot, and after what happened to Leah a few months back, I thought I should go check it out," he answered.

Leah had been shot, nearly fatally, by an unscrupulous geologist trying to steal the mineral rights to the ranch. The thought of Dash, even though he used to be a policeman, going off single-handedly to catch the shooter made Carmen shiver.

"I found him lying beside the road, but there was no sign of the shooter."

Carmen could feel him watching her. As soon as she was ready, he started unfastening the bungee cords. "Could you see a bullet wound?"

"Not specifically, but there was some blood on the left wing up close to his shoulder."

The eagle started screeching when the wood came off the top of his cage. Carmen made shushing sounds and slipped on the gloves. Peering closely, she could see that the big bird was wrapped in a soft plaid cloth, as tightly as a swaddled infant. "Nice job, by the way. You've done this before?"

"No, but Ken gave me play-by-play instructions." Not waiting for her, he tenderly picked up the wrapped bundle and lifted it out of the plastic basket onto the table. Since he didn't scream, Carmen was pretty sure he'd managed to avoid the wicked yellow beak.

"Might've called me with a heads-up," she grumbled. Typical of her grandfather—he only told her what he thought she needed to know. She grabbed another pair of gloves from a hook on the side of the table and handed them to Dash. "Here. You'll have to hold her feet while I check her out."

"His...feet?" Dash gulped, missing her use of the feminine gender. Carmen couldn't see it, but she knew his eyes had gone wide. "You sure that's a good idea?"

"Better to hold on to them than let them move around and find you." Eagle talons could be dangerous as hell, and this was a big bird—maybe fifteen, sixteen pounds. "We'll unwrap her feet first and you need to wrap one hand carefully around each of her ankles, holding her still." She laid her left forearm gently but firmly across the bird's breast, holding the angry raptor in place.

"Won't she lash out with her beak?" he asked as Carmen began to carefully unwrap the soft flannel shirt. It was awkward—sometimes she had to wiggle the cloth out from under the arm holding the bird to the table, but she managed to get the eagle unwrapped without inflicting further damage.

"Not typically. Their talons are their weapons of choice. But I wouldn't put my finger in front of her face either—not if I wanted to keep it." While her left forearm and hand held the right wing and breast in place, she eased open the nearly three-foot-long left wing and slipped off her right glove. With a featherlight touch, she traced the bones of the bird's extended wing.

There. Right up close to the shoulder, she found the wound—just a graze, but the shock from the shot would have been enough to knock her from the sky. There could be spinal trauma or any number of internal injuries as well, but Carmen's gifts told her otherwise. The poor thing had a wounded wing and she'd been stunned but would

otherwise be fine. "The bullet just grazed skin and muscle," she told Dash as she reached for the antiseptic. "It missed the bone, thank goodness. She'll be flying again in a few days."

"That's great." He sighed his relief. The man actually cared about the poor bird, she had to give him that. Not bad for a city slicker. "But I have to ask, if you don't mind—how do you know? I mean, I know you can't..."

"Can't really see?" she said matter-of-factly. "No, not much." Though she pulled the magnifier over and used it to clean the shallow gouge. "It's just something of an instinct, I guess. Leah works with horses. I can sense injuries in wildlife. I've never really tried to make sense of it. It's just a part of my life."

She sensed rather than saw him shrug. "If you say so."

There was a little more to it than that, but she didn't want to explain that to a virtual stranger. She felt the sting in her own shoulder as she absorbed some of the damage into herself to speed the eagle's healing process. Meanwhile, she dabbed antibiotic ointment onto the wound then wrapped it in a heavy layer of gauze. "Try not to rip that off before morning," she told the bird, who screeched back angrily as if she disagreed.

Dash watched in amazement. Every movement Carmen made was quick and precise even though he'd been told she was legally blind. Her pop-bottle-thick glasses obscured her big brown eyes while she worked, but Leah had mentioned that even with them, her cousin could only see shapes and colors, not detail. When he'd first moved out to the line shack on this end of the ranch, Leah had made it very clear that her visually impaired but otherwise gifted cousin was strictly hands-off as far as Dash was concerned.

And that was probably a good idea. Carmen was a knock-out, with rounded, womanly curves overlaying a frame of healthy muscle. Her long, straight hair was the same rich dark brown as the polished cherry wood table at the ranch house. Creamy tan skin was dotted with just a few freckles scattered across the tip of her turned-up nose.

Strong cheekbones and a pointy chin gave her a heart-shaped face, and she had lush lips that just begged to be kissed. Yeah. Keeping her away from losers like Dash was definitely the smart thing to do.

Oh, how his body disagreed though. When Ken had guilt-tripped him into dancing one dance with the older man's wallflower granddaughter, Dash had argued. He was still in lousy shape, with a leg that would never be one hundred percent after a bullet had shattered the femur and shredded the nerves. Not to mention the fact the burn scars on his face and hands would make any sensible female run screaming for cover. But Ken had reminded him that Carmen couldn't see the scars. And that she wasn't much of a dancer either, so she probably wouldn't mind Dash's gimpy leg. So they'd danced. She'd come just up to his chin and he'd spent the next ten minutes inhaling the fragrance of rose-scented shampoo and warm, soft woman. He'd gone hard as a rock, which hadn't helped his already crappy dancing a bit.

Now in this barn that looked more like a high-end vet's office, spotless and gleaming with tile, wood and steel, Dash followed Carmen's instructions and kept an iron grip on the eagle's wicked-looking feet. He'd never seen one outside of a zoo before and sure as hell not this close up. When he'd wrapped the bird up, swaddling it like an infant, it had been unconscious. Now though, it looked as if it could easily – and happily – rip off what was left of Dash's face.

"How do you know it's a she?" he asked Carmen as she finished tying off the gauze. Using one hand to hold down the eagle's broad chest, she tucked the shirt sleeve back around the injured wing, closing it so the bird was once again more or less the shape of a football.

"You can let go now. She's too big to be a male," she said, picking the bird up to cradle her carefully in both hands. "Birds of prey are different from other birds and most mammals. The girls get a lot bigger than the boys."

"Huh." Yet another thing he'd never known. Once upon a time, he'd considered himself a pretty knowledgeable guy, but that had been before he'd come to Texas. It

seemed everything out here was different. He'd never even noticed that birds had a scent before, but he could definitely smell the eagle—sort of a dry, powdery odor over the tang of the disinfectant.

"Open up that cage over there, will you? Top one, left-hand side." Her voice was low for a woman's but rich and full. Remembering the opera he'd heard blaring in her cabin, Dash wondered if she could sing.

Forcing his concentration back on to the task at hand, he immediately stepped ahead of her to where a bank of wire cages in various sizes were lined up along one wall. The top left was the biggest and he could see she kept them clean and lined with fresh newspapers for when patients arrived. He stepped aside as Carmen laid the bird in it then unwrapped his shirt and stepped back. The eagle immediately clambered to her feet and let out a screech.

"Fill up one of those metal bowls with water, would you?" From a stack next to the row of cages, Carmen picked up a half section of a log—it was flat on one side and round with the bark still on the other. When she set it into the cage, bark side up, the bird immediately climbed up on it.

Obediently, Dash filled a big metal dog dish with water and brought it over to Carmen who put it into the cage. "What will you feed her?"

"Fish mostly. I expect Grandfather will show up in the morning with some fresh bass or lake trout. Even if he hadn't sent you, he always seems to know when I have a new patient." She latched the cage securely then moved back over to her worktable and started putting things away with crisp, economical movements. "Thank you, Dash. I'll wash your shirt and get it back to you."

"You don't have to do that," he said. He scooped it up away from her questing fingers. "I go up and use the machines in the bunkhouse a couple times a week."

"Grandfather said you were living in one of the line shacks." Once the table was cleared, she spritzed it down with disinfectant and wiped it off with a paper towel. "I guess it would be uncomfortable sharing the ranch house with the newlyweds."

"Yeah. Mac and Leah are trying to talk me into building my own place. There's plenty of room on the ranch, but..." He shrugged. "For right now, I don't see the need for anything bigger than what I've got."

"I know the feeling." Her voice was filled with understanding, but it was warm and friendly, without the syrupy sympathy he'd grown used to hearing since his injuries eleven months ago. "I like my little cabin too. Not sure what I'd do with anything bigger. Drives my mom crazy."

He followed her over to the sink where they both washed up. Only as they were leaving did he remember the enormous dog who'd plopped down by the door and hadn't moved since they'd walked into the building. Bigger than any German shepherd he'd ever seen, even on the police force, it was mottled in shades of gray and black, with just one white stocking from the knee down on its left front paw. As soon as Carmen turned off the light and stepped out the door, the massive dog was right by her side, occasionally nudging against her when she strayed from the center of the path.

When they reached her door, she turned, her hand on the doorknob. "I made some chili. Way more than I can eat by myself if you'd like to come in for a bit."

He shouldn't. He should thank her nicely, get in his truck and drive away. He had half a bottle of Johnnie Walker stashed in his cabin. That and his hand would get him through the night. Because, god help him, he'd been wanting to jump Carmen's bones the entire time she was working on the eagle.

"Come on," she murmured softly. "It's just a meal. You have to eat, don't you?"

"I'd love to." He heard the words come out of his mouth before he knew he was going to say them. Calling himself all kinds of an idiot, he followed Carmen into her house.

Chapter Two

Carmen couldn't believe she'd gotten up the nerve to actually invite him in for dinner. She hadn't been alone with a man other than her grandfather for ages. Well, maybe Shane, when he'd stopped by to check on a patient. But he was so stupid in love with Leah, Carmen could've walked out to the barn naked and he wouldn't have noticed.

Dash Hyde though—he'd notice. Carmen hadn't missed the erection he'd sported when they'd danced at her cousin's wedding. He'd been as uncomfortable in the crowd as she was, but he'd definitely warmed up once he'd taken her in his arms. He seemed pretty uncomfortable now too, seated across from her at her kitchen table, eating chili and homemade cornbread. She'd had a couple of beers in the fridge, so they sipped at those while they ate, barely talking.

"So, have you heard from Leah?" she finally asked. "I got a postcard in yesterday's mail."

"Yeah, me too," he replied. "So did Mac. Sounds like they're having a good time in Hawaii."

Of course they were—it was their honeymoon. She felt her face flame at the thought of what her cousin was probably up to right now. "Do you have family back in Illinois?"

"Yeah," he answered slowly. "My mother and her husband have three kids, ranging from twenty to twenty-five. They're all still in the Chicago area."

"You grew up with brothers and sisters?" She wouldn't have guessed that. He seemed like such a loner.

"Two brothers, one sister — James, Lauren and Zach, all in college or grad school. I was ten when my oldest brother was born, so we were never exactly close," he said. "It was just me and my mom until I was eight, when she married my stepdad."

"So, you're older than Leah."

"Yeah. And Mac a bit."

"And you were a cop." Oh crap, she hadn't meant to say that. She knew he'd been forced to retire from the Chicago police force after an injury, but nobody had ever told her what. She just knew that whatever had happened he was still carrying around an awful lot of grief from it.

"That I was." His spoon clinked on the side of his bowl as he stirred his chili rather than eating it. "After four years in the Army, I went to the police academy and worked my way up from patrolman to sergeant. Twelve years on the force, and now, I guess, I'm a rancher — at least for the time being."

"I'm sorry," she told him. "It's none of my business."

She sensed his shrug. "It's all right. Everybody else I meet out here dances around it. Truth is, I liked being a cop. I was good at it. Now I can't do that anymore. Life changes, and if we don't change with it, we might as well just curl up and die. Took me awhile, but I finally figured out I wasn't ready for that yet. So here I am, learning to do something else."

"I know exactly what you mean," she said. "My parents would be happy if I still lived at home where they could take care of me and cater to my every whim, keeping me safe every minute of every day. I can't live like that. So here I am, on my own. It's difficult sometimes, but it beats sitting around like a useless doll."

"I imagine Ken keeps a pretty good eye on you," he said with a warm trace of humor creeping back into his voice. "Just like he does on Leah."

"Yeah, Granddad is great, but he doesn't smother. That's one reason I live here, close to him, instead of in Houston near my parents. I love my mom and dad, but they drive me fricking crazy. 'Are you sure you should be cooking?' or 'Do you really think

you should go for a walk with just your dog?' They make me feel like I'm twelve instead of a grown woman."

"Well, I can attest to your ability to cook. This chili is fantastic." Sounds of spoon on bowl and swallowing backed up the fact he was actually eating now. "But yeah, I know what you mean. My mom went overboard too after I was hurt. She's the greatest, but I needed to get back on my own two feet again."

There was a moment filled with nothing but the sounds of eating then he continued. "When it came down to it though, she knew that. I wasn't going to come when the old man's lawyer called. I figured he'd blown us off for all those years, why take anything from him now, you know? But my mother talked me into getting on that plane, insisted I needed to at least see the place, find out a little about who he was."

"And did you?" Carmen ate slowly, enjoying his company, entranced by the sound of his voice.

"As much as I'd like to say I came to terms with my father, what I found out about him was really just about what I'd expected. My biological father was a complete and total bastard. He included Mac and me in the will because he didn't want to hand his entire operation over to a woman, and a part-Comanche one at that, even if she was his own flesh and blood. He didn't think much of Hispanics or blacks either, even though he had no problem fucking any of our mothers. In the end, Mac and I both believe he split the ranch and the money between the three of us because he couldn't quite decide which of us was the lesser evil."

Carmen listened for bitterness in his voice and was pleased when she heard only a little—the old hurt of the child he'd been, and nothing but resignation from the man. "Sorry to say, but that tallies perfectly with what I knew of my uncle. I'd wondered if your mother was black. Nobody's crass enough to mention it openly, of course, but there's been some gossip to that effect. Your skin's paler than Mac's—at least I thought so from the few times I've seen you close up—but there's something about the caste of your features that suggests some African blood." He was muscular and strong, she

knew that much—and tall. He shaved his head and Leah had sworn it suited him. She'd also given Carmen a photo to look at under her magnifying lens, just so her cousin would "know" her new neighbor. Carmen had made out the vivid green of Dash's eyes and the strong jut of his jaw. She'd also seen the scars that created a reddened, lacy pattern across his left cheekbone and jaw.

"Mom is biracial," Dash told her easily. "She always said my green eyes came from her father as well as my own. I have to admit, I was a little worried about moving to a rural community. Nobody cares in Chicago, but I wasn't sure about Texas."

Carmen shrugged. "I'm a hybrid too—mostly Comanche on my mother's side, while my dad is half Cherokee and half Irish, which is where I get the freckles. But you are what you are, and there's no point trying to hide it or change it. We have our bigots here, just like everywhere else. I bet Chicago does too, you just chose to ignore them. I do the same in Morgan's Creek."

"Smart lady, as well as a gorgeous one," he said with a laugh. "Even with the freckles, which I think are cute. I can definitely see the relationship between you and Leah." He fiddled with his glass before taking a drink. "I guess that makes us sort-of cousins, doesn't it?"

Was that disappointment she'd heard in his voice? God, she hoped so.

"Everybody knows the story, Dash, and they know you and I aren't any kind of kin. I'd like it if we could be friends though." She didn't know much about seduction, but she did her best to put a husky note of suggestion into her words.

"Friends." He paused for a moment. "I'd like that, Carmen. Even if I'm not sure I'm any good at the whole concept anymore. You might be getting yourself a pretty lousy bargain."

"I'll take that chance," she told him. "Everybody needs friends."

"Are friends allowed to help clear the table?" he asked a few minutes later when they'd both finished eating. "You cooked, so it only seems fair."

"Definitely," she confirmed. "If you want to rinse the dishes, I'll load them in the dishwasher."

"You could come back tomorrow night," she offered softly a few minutes later, after she'd walked him out to her front porch. "Just to check on the eagle. Or maybe to help me eat the lasagna I was thinking about making. I'm sure it will be way too much for just one person."

Dash paused halfway to the step. She hoped he could tell she was offering more. If he came back tomorrow night, it would actually be a date. Based on his hesitation, he understood. She heard him swallow hard then she thought she saw his head dip in a nod. "You have a grill?"

"Of course." She leaned back against the cool logs fronting the cabin.

"If you can manage a salad, I could bring a couple of steaks. Seems those are pretty easy to come by when you own part of a cattle ranch."

"I think I can handle a salad."

He patted the top of Silver's head. "That okay with you, boy?"

Silver gave a contented chuff and moved over for a scratch from the departing visitor. Since he usually only did that with Ken, Carmen was astounded as well as secretly delighted.

Dash reached out to scratch Silver's ears. "He's quite a dog—seems devoted to you."

"He's one quarter gray wolf, one quarter malamute and half German Shepherd," Carmen explained. "Believe it or not, he was the runt of the litter—when he was born, nobody thought he'd survive. I took care of him, and now he takes care of me."

"If that's the runt, I'd hate to see the big guys in a dark alley," Dash mused. He leaned down and spoke to Silver. "Okay if I kiss her, boy?"

Carmen figured she wasn't supposed to hear, but she did, and she felt a big grin break out over her face. "He doesn't mind a bit," she whispered.

"Well, in that case..." Carmen's nerves sang an overture as he stepped back toward the cabin and leaned in. "Thank you, Carmen, for a lovely dinner." His hands braced on the wall on either side of her head, he leaned in and laid his lips over hers.

The kiss was soft—little more than a whisper-light touch of his full lips. That wasn't what Carmen wanted. Damn the butterflies in her stomach, she wanted him to know that she was interested in this—and a lot more—from him. Clamping her hands on his shoulders, she pulled him closer and opened her mouth.

He didn't seem to need much encouragement. Moving his hands from the wall, he slid one into her hair and the other around her waist. Slowly, gently, he deepened the kiss, his tongue at first tracing her lips then carefully slipping inside.

Carmen swirled hers around it, savoring the taste of chili and beer and man. Then she sucked lightly on the tip, pressing her breasts into the hard plane of his chest.

Dash groaned, taking charge of the kiss and ravishing her mouth until neither of them could breathe when they finally fell apart.

"Umm—I guess I'll see you tomorrow," he said raggedly as he stepped back and grabbed hold of the post supporting the porch roof.

"Can't wait," she managed. "Drive safe, Dash."

"Good night," he returned as he spun and walked down the steps. "Sleep tight."

His truck door slammed, the engine roared to life, and then he was gone.

* * * * *

"Hello, Grandfather." Carmen didn't need to see the man standing in the doorway of the barn to know who it was. She could sense her grandfather's presence as easily as she could sense the sunshine on a summer day. "Did you bring me a fish for the eagle?"

"Of course." His boot heels clattered on the tile floor as he crossed to the sink and laid his bounty into it. "Three mid-sized bass should see him through the next couple of days, right?"

"That should be plenty." Carmen finished putting a stack of clean towels into a cupboard and turned, moving toward him. "Though she's a big girl, isn't she?"

Ken stepped over to the eagle and wrapped his arm around Carmen's waist as she moved up next to him. "She is. Dash said it was a bullet wound?"

"Just a graze. She'll be fine in a few days." She kissed his weathered cheek then went over to the sink. The fish had been scaled and gutted, which wasn't optimal nutrition, but would make for easier storage and serving. She cut one in half then wrapped the remainder in aluminum foil. Then she placed the cut piece on a plastic plate and put it in the eagle's cage. She loved the fact her grandfather just stood back and let her work without getting in the way by trying to help.

"What about the other patient? Think he'll be okay anytime soon?" Ken waited while Carmen finished washing up then walked with her and Silverfoot back up to the house. When he settled down at the table, Carmen knew he was here to grill her, so she poured two mugs of coffee and sat across from him.

"You mean Dash."

"Of course." He picked up his mug and sipped. "Man's been through a hell of a time."

"So I've heard," she replied wryly. "Though only the basics. Seems to be handling it, but he's got a lot of scars, inside even more than out. Offhand, I'd say he's mending."

Ken was silent for a while, and Carmen smiled. She knew the old man far too well. He wouldn't come out and question her, but he must have suspected there was some...spark between the two of them.

She rolled her eyes and added, "He thinks a lot of you, you know. And he loves Leah and Mac already, even if he doesn't know it yet. Bringing him here may have been the most decent thing Joe Morgan ever did, even if he did it for all the wrong reasons."

Ken snorted. "Other than marrying my daughter and giving us your cousin, you mean. But yes, I agree. This land has power. It's a good place for a man to make a new beginning—as long as he doesn't break any hearts in the process."

"I'm not going to let him break my heart, Grandfather. I'm a big girl now. Any relationship I go into is with my eyes open, and it's strictly between me and the man involved. If there *was* something going on, it wouldn't be any of your business, you nosy old coot." It was so easy to talk to him—she could never tease like that with her own parents, who took everything in life far too seriously.

His laugh was easy and affectionate, just as it had always been. "I love you too, missy. And I know you're a woman grown. Just be careful though. The heart you risk might not be your own. He's a good man, and he could use a little kindness, but don't get into something just out of compassion. In the long run, that would hurt him more than it would help."

"I know." She suppressed a satisfied grin. Compassion be damned, what she and Dash had was all about plain old *passion*. After last night's kiss, she was sure of it. "I'll be careful, I promise."

"Figured you would." He drained his mug, stood and set it in the sink. Stepping back over to the table, he mussed her hair then dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "Happen to know the boy has a fondness for oatmeal cookies." He scratched Silver on the head as he made his way out the door.

Carmen sipped slowly on her coffee as she stared after him, or at least in the direction of the door—anything beyond the end of her fingers was just a haze of light or shadows.

"Well, Silver? Think we should make some oatmeal cookies?"

Chapter Three

Nobody had questioned Dash when he left the ranch early, claiming he needed to make a run into town. He'd gotten used to the small grocery store in Morgan's Creek, and he was able to chat comfortably with the owner Ted Miller, who'd wasted no time in showing Dash his own bullet scar, high on his shoulder, which had earned him a Purple Heart in Vietnam. Though Dash wouldn't say the Millers were exactly friends, at least he was able to relax in their company. Baby steps, his mother would call them. He wasn't over his discomfort of going out in public, but he was making a few small strides in that direction.

He picked up potatoes, a bottle of red wine and a few other items to accompany the steaks he'd liberated from the ranch freezer. He hesitated, though, over the small section of fresh flowers. Mary, Mrs. Miller, caught him deliberating.

"Now I know Leah isn't back yet," the silver-haired woman teased. "So there must be someone else who caught your eye. The roses just came in today, so they're good and fresh."

Dash felt himself blush, which he hadn't known he was capable of—since maybe junior high. He looked at the roses then shook his head and pointed at something sort of white and swirly. "What are those?"

"Calla lilies. Very elegant." Her faded blue eyes twinkled. "Of course, if it's someone who lives out here, she might be more of a wildflower kind of girl. I've got a big patch of bluebonnets in the side yard—I could go cut you a bunch."

"Are those the ones growing all over the place?" He'd seen the blue-covered roadsides and gardens everywhere, even around his line shack—it was really quite impressive, but weren't the flowers awfully small for a bouquet? The ones at his place were only a few inches tall.

"State flower of Texas, my boy," she replied. "Hearty enough to thrive in this environment but about the prettiest damn things on earth. The ones I have are a lot bigger than the local variety, and I grew them from seed, so don't worry, they're legal to cut."

Pretty, wild, resilient—that suited Carmen perfectly. Dash nodded and thanked her then he finished checking out. Mary was waiting for him by the door with a big tissue-wrapped bouquet of the vivid bluebonnets.

"These are on the house. You have a good night now, hon," she told him, handing him the bundle. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Another middle-aged woman in the check-out line laughed heartily. "That leaves you a lot of room, son," she teased. "Mary Miller was a wild one back in the day. Just ask Ted."

"Look who's talking, Loretta," Mary shot back with a wink. "You went out with half the football team in high school—all at the same time." With a snicker and a wink, she elbowed Dash toward the door. "Now get going before those flowers wilt."

* * * * *

Carmen dithered in front of her closet for far longer than she should have. Stupid, really. Since she had real trouble making out patterns or matching things that weren't solid blocks of color, most of her wardrobe consisted of jeans or denim shorts and simple shirts—solid color scoop-necked Ts for summer and sweaters for winter, with some long-sleeved man-tailored shirts in denim or white for in between. She also had a couple of simple black dresses she mostly wore when visiting her parents in Houston since she couldn't bring herself to wear jeans to the opera, which was the one passion she shared with her mom. Wearing a dress seemed way over the top though. She finally settled on jeans and a butter-soft T in a bright green that reminded her of Dash's eyes. Silver hoops at her ears and her silver charm bracelet weren't too much, she decided, and she swiped on a coat of her favorite grapefruit-flavored lip gloss. There. That

would have to do. Makeup was more than she could manage. Leaving her feet bare, she padded downstairs to finish making the salad.

She popped the bowl back into the fridge to stay cool just seconds before she heard the truck out front. Silver chuffed softly but didn't bark or move as the doorbell rang, a sure sign that he'd already accepted Dash into his pack. Carmen couldn't help but grin at the thought as she crossed the room to open the door. Silver was a very discerning judge of character and not usually so accepting of another potential alpha.

When she opened the door, Dash thrust a large bundle into her arms. "For you."

The scent was a dead giveaway, though judging by the size, these had come from a garden rather than the side of the road. Carmen buried her nose in the bluebonnets and inhaled deeply. "Thank you—they're my favorites. Come on in and have a seat while I get a vase."

"How's the eagle doing?" He stayed in the center of the floor while she got a vase from a cabinet, fortunately with minimal fumbling. Having a near-photographic memory helped her muddle along on her own, but getting things from the back of cupboards was still tricky when she couldn't see.

"She's doing well. I'll probably let her go day after tomorrow. You can come help me release her if you want." She filled the vase with water then set it on the counter beside the bundle of flowers, which she unwrapped and carefully lowered into the vase. "Would you like to go see her before we start dinner?"

"Why don't I start the grill then we can go out to the barn while it's heating up?" She heard a thunk and realized he'd set a sack of groceries on the counter.

"Sounds good." She led him through her living area to the sliding glass doors opening out onto the tiled patio her grandfather had built her. The gas barbecue was bricked into one end of the space, with a tiled counter beside it.

"Nice," said Dash, with a distinct note of masculine approval in his voice. "Always wanted a setup like this, but it's hard when you live in a condo. Might just have to add one on to the line shack."

Carmen laughed. "Or you could build yourself an actual house, like Leah's been telling you to. But we had that conversation last night."

"We did. And again, maybe eventually I will. For right now though, I'm comfortable where I am." There was a whoosh as the gas burner lit and then Dash fiddled with the controls before closing the lid. "Now let's go see the bird."

He captured her hand as they walked to the barn, and that small touch sent a tingle all the way to Carmen's toes. It was going to be a challenge to make it through dinner without dragging him upstairs. She'd never been this turned-on by a guy before, not to the point where her jeans were wet just from walking beside him, holding hands.

"I didn't tell you last night that your barn is amazing. It looks every bit as professional as Shane's veterinary office," Dash told her as they moved into the cool, shady barn.

"Shane helped me set it up," she admitted. "We actually work together quite a bit. Since wild animals don't have anyone to pay vet bills, he usually lets me do what I can and handles things such as surgeries and euthanasia as needed."

He watched intently as she fed the eagle the other half of this morning's fish, and once again pitched in, filling the water bowl and dumping dirty newspapers in the trash while she relined the bird's cage.

"So what do you do to pay the bills?" he asked as they walked back to the house. "Your grandfather mentioned you were some kind of artist, but he didn't give me any details."

She caught the note of uncertainty in his voice and grinned. "And you're wondering how someone who can't see can draw. You and everybody else. The answer to that is, I don't know. I just can. Especially animals. What I do is write children's books based on Native American legends and illustrate them with my pen-and-ink drawings. The publisher has someone else who sometimes adds color. When I'm telling the story, the art just seems to flow. I couldn't tell you exactly what they look like, but I

can tell if they're good or not as I'm doing them. It's just another gift—one I don't question too closely, just in case I jinx it."

"That's...amazing," Dash said. They stopped on the patio where he fussed with the grill some more. "Maybe after dinner you could show me some of your drawings." Seemingly right at home, he let himself back into the house and started pulling things out of his grocery bag.

"If you want. You don't seem as freaked out by the idea that I can draw as some of my dates have been."

Dash shrugged. "Cops aren't supposed to believe in anything they can't see, touch or enter into evidence. But I don't know a single one, especially the good ones, who don't rely on some kind of intuition. I've knocked on doors where the wife knew the moment her husband died, and was waiting for us to come tell her. My mom has a friend who reads tea leaves, and let me tell you, I'd have been a lot better off if I'd listened to her more often. Weird shit exists in this world. Why not a visually impaired woman who creates art? Now a more important question. Do you like California shiraz?"

Once again she couldn't help but laugh. Her nose picked up a hint of garlic and pepper, and figured he was seasoning the steaks. "It's fine. There's a corkscrew in the drawer next to the sink. I'll get some glasses."

* * * * *

"I think you have everyone fooled, Dash Hyde," Carmen teased as they finished loading the dishwasher after dinner. "Everyone in Morgan's Creek is convinced you're this quiet hermit, but you can really hold up your end of a conversation, can't you?"

Dash felt his face heat. "I'm not—comfortable around most people. For some reason it's easy to talk to you."

Looking around the great room, he saw only a couple of doors—one led to the bathroom where he'd washed up before dinner, and the other, next to it, was open,

showing a laundry-utility area. The entire rest of the first floor was one big open space, with soft earth tones on the walls and colorful rugs on the gleaming pine floors. Furnishings and the area rugs divided it into three basic sections—kitchen, living room and office-studio. Her voice softened as she took him by the hand, leading him over to her work area. “Is it because you know I can’t see the scars?”

“At first, maybe,” he confessed. “For a few minutes anyway. After that you were just...you.” He didn’t add that part of it had to be the massive attraction he felt anytime they were together. Of course it had been hard to get through dinner without jumping her bones too. His dick was trying to push its way out through the front of his jeans, but he really wanted to see her artwork.

“Thanks.” She lifted their clasped hands to her mouth and kissed his knuckles. “I like you too. Now here. These drawings on the wall came from my first book—the story of *How Grandmother Spider Stole the Sun*.”

She pointed to a series of six framed black-and-white drawings that nearly took his breath away with their simplicity and beauty. The animals were stylized, almost like the fetishes he’d seen in museums, but they were very clearly full of life and personality. The first showed the backs of a group of animals, all staring at a very clever-looking fox. Dash studied the second, which looked like some kind of rodent, but with a big, fluffy tail. “So what’s the story?”

“When the Earth was first made, this side of it had no light, but the Fox had heard that there was sun on the other side. The Opossum had a big bushy tail, so he volunteered to go steal the sun from the other side of the world, and hide it in his tail to carry it home.”

“But opossums don’t have bushy tails,” Dare said. “At least the ones we have in Chicago sure don’t.”

“They’re the same animal,” she said with that light, sweet laugh. “But this is a story. Just listen. The opossum tried to steal a piece of the sun, but it burned all the hair off his tail and the people there caught him and took their sun back.” Pointing to the next

frame, she showed him the opossum, this time with his familiar naked tail, which had smoke steaming from it.

"Ah, I get it." Dash looked at the next picture. "Eagle?"

"Nope. Buzzard. When he tried to steal the sun, it burned all the feathers off his head." Sure enough, the next one showed the same bird with a bare, smoldering pate.

"This is really cool. Comanche legend?"

"Cherokee—my paternal great-grandmother used to love telling me these stories when I was little. Do you want to hear how it ends?"

"Well, I'm guessing the spider is involved." The sixth and seventh pictures showed a large spider, sitting in a dark tree at first then, in the end, on a web holding a round jar with a brilliant sun shining in the sky. Odd, how all that could be portrayed with just white paper and black ink, but Carmen had managed it beautifully.

"Grandmother Spider made a jar out of clay and spun a web. Then after she captured the sun in her jar, she scurried home along the silken strands. Not only did she bring the sun to the Cherokee people, she also gave them the gift of pottery."

"Damn," he said, staring at the collection and shaking his head. "I expected you to be good, but these are...phenomenal. Carmen Whitefeather, you are one multitalented woman." He dropped her hand to cup her face with both of his and kissed her slowly and deeply—the way he'd been wanting to since he arrived.

"Holy crap," she gasped after they came up for air. "You're pretty talented yourself. I think I need another glass of wine. Want one?"

"I'm driving back to my place," he reminded her. "It's not far, but I doubt there's cab service available."

Shoot, she thought she was being obvious, but clearly she was rustier at this sort of thing than she'd thought. "You could stay awhile."

The little groan he almost managed to suppress was the best sound she could have heard. "Not a good idea."

"Isn't it?" She inched along the back of the sofa then reached out and laid her hand over his. "Last time I checked we were both consenting adults."

"Yeah, but your grandfather is a friend of mine – and he carries a big-ass shotgun."

"Grandfather knows I'm not a vestal virgin." She moved closer so she could feel the heat emanating from this body. "I haven't had a lot of lovers, but he's always been okay with the ones I choose. In return, I don't mention his weekly visits to a certain widow in town. We keep an eye on each other, but we don't try to control each other's lives." She was stretching the truth, but only a little. There'd been exactly two lovers in the past five years, neither of them lasting very long.

"I don't know," Dash said. Beneath hers, his hand gripped the edge of the wooden sofa table so hard it had to hurt. She knew his hands had been damaged in the fire he'd survived. "It's been – awhile for me." There was a tremor in his voice she could tell had nothing to do with desire, though his taut posture told her he was interested.

"Since before you were hurt?" Ah, performance anxiety. That she could understand, though she was pretty damn sure Dash wouldn't have any problems in that category. Not based on how hard he'd been when they danced.

She knew he nodded – she'd already tuned into him almost the way she usually only did with animals. There were only a very few people she'd ever become that comfortable with, and almost all of them were family. Never had that intimate connection happened in conjunction with sexual awareness. That unique combination made her crave a deeper exploration of the possibilities.

She reached up and touched his cheek. "What about you? Do you *want* to stay? No harm, no foul if you don't. I promise not to even tell Leah or Granddad."

"I want to stay," he rumbled. "I'm just not sure I should. You're a tempting woman, Carmen Whitefeather. The thing is, I like you too, a hell of a lot. I don't want to mess up what might turn out to be a good friendship."

"I promise." She held her hand up over her heart. "We stay friends, regardless of how the with-benefits part goes."

"And if your grandfather tries to kill me?" He brought his hand up to cover the one she'd rested on his cheek. "Will you promise to protect me?"

Carmen laughed. She didn't think Dash would have trouble defending himself from anyone, let alone a seventy-five-year-old man. "I promise. But don't worry, he rarely scalps anyone these days."

His answering chuckle was deep and rich, if just a little rusty. "Okay, even I'm not enough of an inner-city boy to believe in that stereotype." He lifted the hand that wasn't over hers to rub his shaved head. "Besides, I've got that covered on my own."

Carmen lifted her fingers from his cheek and smoothed them across the unmarked side of his head, from his ear, down to the back of his neck. "It suits you," she said, marveling at the texture, smooth skin roughened by just the slightest stubble. "Have you always shaved it?"

"No, just since the hospital," he admitted. "It—doesn't grow in well where the scars are."

Carmen went up on her toes and kissed the skin just below his left ear where she remembered the scarring started. "Want to see the rest of my house, Dash?"

Chapter Four

Dash didn't think he could have said no if a herd of cattle had stampeded through the room. For the first time since the fire, he felt alive. His heart pounded in his chest while blood coursed through his veins and pooled in his cock.

Dash had been dying to get a closer look at the illustrations on the drawing table, but right now he was even more interested in seeing a bed.

Dash lifted two glasses of wine in one hand as Carmen took his other and led him over to the rustic log staircase, moving with a calm assurance that would have given a stranger no indication she couldn't see where she was going.

He paused as they emerged onto the second-floor loft.

It only covered the front third of the cabin—basically the kitchen and laundry areas, leaving the living room ceiling to soar to the cabin's full two-story height. Like the floor below, one end was walled off, holding two doors—the open one was a bath, the other, he guessed, a closet—and the rest was an airy, open space overlooking the living room below. There was a plush chaise lounge up by the railing, next to a bookshelf, and in the back corner, by two big windows, was a king-sized bed made from thick pine logs. After he saw that, with its smooth cream-colored sheets and hand-made quilt, Dash quit paying attention to anything else in the room.

Except Carmen.

He leaned his back against the wall at the top of the stairs, set the glasses down on the bookshelf and pulled her into his arms. She came willingly, looping her arms around his neck and smiling up at him.

Giving her plenty of time to back away, he bent his head to hers. Instead of flinching though, she lifted up on her toes to meet him, eagerly pressing her lips against his.

Dash tried to start off slowly, but Carmen didn't let him. She flattened her body along his and opened her mouth, inviting him in. His cock ached where it lay against the rounded curves of her belly as he slid his tongue into the wet heat of her mouth, tasting cookies and wine, and over it all, the unique flavor of her. He splayed one hand across her sweetly flared ass and buried the other in her thick, lustrous hair. Then he held on as the kiss took on a life of its own.

When she tipped her head to deepen the kiss, her glasses bumped hard against his cheek and she made a small sound of pain. Dash eased away from her mouth and took them off her face, laying them carefully on the shelf. "You okay?"

"Hell yes," she murmured, grabbing the back of his head to pull him back down. Her breathing was as ragged as his own.

He kissed her again, this time sliding his hands up under her snug green T-shirt to find the warm, smooth skin of her back. It took him three tries to unsnap her bra—his fingers didn't work as well as they had before the fire—but once he did, he moved one hand between them to palm a ripe, heavy breast.

Her low moan spilled into his mouth and she staggered, her weight falling more heavily against his bad leg. Dash winced and reluctantly pulled his hands out from under her top. "Bed, honey," he whispered.

Carmen beamed up at him. "Smart man, as well as sexy." She shimmied out of his arms and across the room to the bed, pulling her shirt and bra off in one smooth movement as she went. Keeping her eyes fixed on his, she reached for the snap of her jeans and slowly pushed down the zipper.

It was hard to decide where to focus his gaze, between her sweet face, her plump, swaying breasts with dark raspberry nipples or the pale yellow cotton underwear being revealed as she lowered her jeans. Then she lowered the panties as well, and he licked his lips at the sight of her smooth, bare pussy.

"You shave?" Without being able to see?

Carmen chuckled. "Wax. There is a salon in Morgan's Creek—and a friend of mine is the esthetician. Darla does good work."

His mouth was dry as he imagined running his tongue over that sleek skin. "Yeah, she really does." Frankly the woman deserved a medal.

Her long hair framed her breasts as she crossed her arms beneath them, lifting them in a way that made his aching erection press even harder against the fly of his jeans. "One of us has too many clothes on."

Dash shook his head. He'd been standing there like a lump, letting her get naked all by herself. He kicked off his sneakers, yanked his plaid shirt over his head and peeled off his jeans and socks in record time before crossing to the bed. "One problem. I didn't exactly come—prepared for this." He'd chickened out when it had come to buying condoms at the local grocery store.

"I think there's some in the nightstand." She turned from him to pull down the covers, giving Dash a close-up view of the best ass he'd ever seen. Carmen had the curves of a goddess. "For the record, I've tested clean, haven't been with anyone in over a year and I'm on the Pill, to regulate my cycle."

Dash snorted. "It's been about that for me too." The fire had been eleven months ago, and he'd been on a dry spell before that. "And with all the time I spent in the hospital, I've been tested for everything from leprosy to distemper and then some. But better safe than sorry. I'd be more comfortable suiting up."

Her laugh warmed something in his chest. "I like a cautious man." She reached into a drawer and fished out a handful of foil-wrapped packets, which she tossed on the nightstand. "The ones in the red wrappers are magnums." As he moved closer, she ran one soft hand up his thigh then wrapped it around his cock. "Mmm. Definitely the red ones."

Oh man, it was almost enough to make him come, just having her fingers wrapped around his shaft. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed so that he stood between her knees. Dash watched in fascination as her glossy dark head lowered toward his groin.

Her pink tongue flicked out and swiped the drop of pre-cum off his tip, with a touch so light it felt like nothing more than a breeze.

She lifted his cock and traced her tongue down the ridge then weighed his balls in her other hand while she licked them, toying with the short, crinkly hairs.

"You keep that up, this is going to be over before we start," he told her. "Like I said, it's been way too long."

"Poor baby," she teased with a low chuckle. Before he could respond, she slurped the tip of him into her mouth and sucked.

"Carmen!"

Her dark eyes danced as she looked up at him, and it was hard to remember she couldn't see him clearly when she made eye contact so perfectly. So he quit trying. In this arena, her handicap wasn't an issue at all. His was much more to the point—he didn't think he could stand much longer without concentrated effort, and her mouth was making conscious thinking pretty impossible. He pulled his pelvis back away from her and slid his hands under her knees, so that when he came down on top of her, she was pinned to the bed with her legs up around his hips. "Gotcha."

Again she laughed, and her lighthearted joy delighted something that had gone cold and dark inside Dash's soul. When was the last time he'd actually had fun?

Carmen kissed his chin. "I guess you do. Now what are you going to do about it?"

He couldn't help a short chuckle in return. "First, get us all the way onto the bed before we hurt ourselves. Then I think I'm going to find out what a Texas girl tastes like."

"You already did. Steak, oatmeal cookies and shiraz, right?"

They wriggled their way up the mattress until Carmen's head was on one of the fluffy pillows. Her ankles were still locked around Dash's hips, and his cock was pressed into the soft skin of her lower abdomen.

He kissed her again, deeply and thoroughly, then pulled back a bit and licked his lips. "Yeah, that's about right. Now let's see if it's the same all over." Bracing himself on his elbows, he trailed his mouth down the side of her throat to nibble on her collarbone.

"Not the same," he murmured a few minutes later as he licked a line down her sternum. "Salty, sweet, with just a hint of spice." He nuzzled under her breast to taste the crease below then repeated that on the other side. Shifting his elbows, he brought his hands up to cup the sides of her breasts and pushed the two pillowy mounds together, burying his face between them and inhaling deeply of her feminine scent. His cock rubbed against the sheet between her knees, urging him to speed things up. His brain said, *Slow things down*.

"Quit teasing, Dash." Carmen took his head in her hands and nudged him toward one ripe nipple.

"What's the matter, honey? These need a little attention?" He rasped one deep-rose nipple with his thumb. Her large areolas were a paler shade, really a dark tan, but the engorged nubs were a dark, dusky pink, almost purple, just like a ripe, fresh raspberry.

"Umm-hmm," she moaned. "More, damn it!"

Never one to deny a lady, Dash dipped his head to lick the turgid bud with the tip of his tongue. When she grabbed both ears and pulled him closer, he took her nipple between his lips and sucked.

"Yes," she cried, still cupping the back of his head with one hand to hold him in place while she arched her spine to push her flesh even deeper into his mouth. With the other she kneaded his shoulder, the only other part of his body she could probably reach. Even there, her touch set off his nerve endings as if her fingers were electrically charged. He sucked deeper and harder, her ragged breathing and fractured whimpers music to his ears.

Her hips pulsed restlessly beneath him and he shifted to the side, bringing one hand down to the silken skin of her waxed mound. She was so wet, his fingers slid effortlessly between her swollen labia, and he stroked lightly along her slit, learning her

shape and textures. His aching cock pushed against her thigh, begging for its share of the attention, but again he ignored it. He knew he'd go off like a rocket as soon as he got inside her pussy, and he wanted to make sure it was good for her first.

With that in mind, he slid one finger into her channel, finding her as tight and soaked as he'd hoped. Slipping another finger in stretched her muscles just a bit, so he kept it to two, working them in and out as he switched his mouth to her other breast. Once she'd caught his rhythm, he added his thumb to the mix, rasping it along the side of her clit as he fingered her.

She let go of his head to grab a fistful of the sheet and her spine bowed up off the mattress when Dash added a third finger and pressed harder on her clit.

"Dashieeeeeeeel!"

His name had never sounded so good. Her cunt muscles clamped down on his fingers and cream flooded his hand as she cried out in her rich contralto voice.

Dash held his fingers deep until she slumped back onto the bed. After dropping one last soft kiss on each of her nipples, he sat, grabbed a condom then moved back between her legs. Carmen licked her lips as she grinned up at him.

"Red one, right?"

Dash shook his head and snickered. "Yeah. But something tells me we're going to fit together just perfectly."

"Fuck me, Dashiell. I don't want to wait anymore." She bent her knees so her feet were planted firmly on the bed and held her breath as he positioned the crest of his cock at her entrance and slowly pushed inside.

"No more waiting, beautiful. Oh damn, you're tight." Her muscles gripped his shaft like a fist.

Entwining her fingers with his, he pinned both her hands on the pillow beside her head and leaned down to kiss her while he started to move. He tried to keep it slow, to bring her back up a second time, but it had been so long and she was so damn perfect.

He could feel the twinges in his thigh as he worked his hips, but he didn't care — even if he couldn't stand tomorrow, this was worth it. He didn't think he'd ever been harder as he pistoned in and out of Carmen's hot, sweet cunt.

Again she surprised him. Just before he felt his balls tighten to the point of eruption, she squealed into his mouth, coming again and clamping down on his shaft like a vise. With her convulsing around him, he couldn't hold back and he groaned pitifully as he shoved himself deep and blasted a stream of semen that didn't seem to end until he was barely conscious, seeing black spots and silver stars in front of his eyes.

Eventually, the moment of suspended animation ended and he pulled his mouth away from hers to gasp for breath. He also let go of one of her hands so he could brush a few tendrils of long, dark hair off her sweat-dampened cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered, her lower lip trembling, and oh shit, were those tears glistening in her eyes? "That was — oh wow, I don't even know what that was."

Dash just shook his head. He didn't either. All he could do was kiss her reddened, swollen lips, this time softly and tenderly. Long moments later, he rolled to the side and limped to the bathroom where he peeled the condom off his still semi-erect cock and tried to catch his breath.

When he returned to the bedroom, Carmen had retrieved the glasses of wine and was sitting up against the headboard, still gloriously naked. She patted the sheet beside her, and when he sat, she handed him one of the still-cool glasses and raised her own.

They sat there in comfortable silence until they'd both finished their wine.

"I promised Mac I'd be up at the bunkhouse by eight," Dash said finally, reluctantly getting ready to get up and leave. "I guess I should be heading home."

"Or," she said, setting her empty glass aside, "I can set the alarm for six." Then she leaned over and kissed him, sliding her hand over his reviving erection.

* * * * *

What the hell had he done?

Dash hurried through a shower and changed into clean clothes before heading up to the main compound on the ranch. He was only running a few minutes late—somehow he and Carmen had managed not to get out of bed until an hour after her alarm went off. Three times in one night would have been good before his injuries. That he'd pulled it off now was freaking amazing.

Now he had to spend the day pretending nothing had happened. Please, god, let him not run into Ken. He'd have to face Carmen's grandfather sometime, but he wasn't ready for it today. Whatever was happening was too new, too raw. He parked his truck behind the barns and rubbed a spot just below his sternum. Thinking about Carmen made his chest ache, along with his dick.

"Look who finally rolled in," Mac called as Dash walked slowly into the barn.

He wasn't limping—not quite, but his leg had gotten one hell of a workout last night and it probably shouldn't take a whole lot of abuse today. When he'd first gotten to the ranch, he'd pushed himself so hard every day that after a week he couldn't even stand. Ken had shown up at the line shack with some kind of herbal-smelling green liniment and a refill of Dash's muscle relaxant prescription. The older man even admitted he'd called Dash's mother to get the paperwork. It sucked that Dash was repaying Ken's friendship by fooling around with his granddaughter.

"More fence work today?" Dash asked Mac, trying not to grimace at the idea of hours in the saddle.

Mac nodded. "North pasture."

"Hey, I'd happily trade riding fences for working on the breeding records," Mick Dana, the ranch foreman, said with a grimace. "Joe was doing most of the computer work before he died, and I just don't have a knack for it."

"Computers?" Dash quirked an eyebrow at the older man—a dyed-in-the-wool Texas cowboy, right down to the bow-legged stance. "What, like entering info into a database?"

Mick shrugged. "I guess. Putting in the data then looking at the bloodlines to see which animals are too closely related to breed, that sort of thing. Used to be paper studbooks, which I could make sense out of, but now it's all on that damn machine."

"I'll take that trade," Dash offered. "All our reports at the force were on computers, and I took a bunch of classes at the community college once upon a time. Computers and I get along pretty well." Better than pretty well actually, but he didn't like to brag. Doing data management would give his leg a rest, besides making him feel as if he was doing something he was actually good at.

"Deal." Mick stuck out his hand and shook it before turning to Mac. "I'll get him going then meet you up in the north pasture in about an hour, all right?"

Mac grinned. "It doesn't matter to me. I do enough paperwork for the bar—I've got no interest in adding to it. All yours, bro."

Bro. Dash smiled back at his half brother and shook his head. It was still weird to have this whole other family, but he liked it. He also liked Mac a lot, and they'd both come to adore Leah. There was a story there. Apparently, Mac had always known Leah was his half sister, the old man's only legitimate child, but she'd had no idea that her father had also sired sons. It could have been a real clusterfuck when it all came out, but somehow, the two had made it work. Dash couldn't be prouder of his newly discovered siblings.

He wished his mom could meet them, but he understood that she was uncomfortable about the idea of visiting Joe Morgan's former home. Even more, he'd like to get her take on Carmen. He was pretty sure the two women would hit it off right away. They were both survivors who'd chosen to embrace life instead of being defeated by the odds against them.

It didn't take long for Mick to teach Dash the basics of the database they used for stud records, and soon he immersed himself in the data. He'd known ranching was more complex than it seemed, but now he really had the chance to delve into the specifics, recording things like bloodlines, the calves' birth records, and how much the

steers sold for at market. Vaccinations, castration and artificial insemination—the information was all laid out in a straightforward manner he could read and understand. The whole process was actually fascinating, and Dash was shocked to realize several hours had passed before one of the hands knocked on the office door to ask if Dash wanted to join them for lunch at the bunkhouse.

“No, that’s okay.” He’d packed a sandwich, planning to eat it out on the trail. He still wasn’t particularly comfortable with being in a group. Most of the ranch hands had gotten used to looking at what was left of Dash’s face, but Dash hadn’t adjusted to the quickly averted eyes or the pitying looks that still happened once in a while.

“Up to you, boss,” the man said, closing the door behind him as he left.

Boss. He hadn’t gotten used to that yet either. Half the time he still felt like an interloper on the ranch, though it did get better with each passing day. He had to admit though, the first time he’d really felt at home since he’d been in Texas had been the other night at Carmen’s kitchen table. Last night in her bed had been even more so, and yeah, he’d promised to come back tonight.

Holy shit, what was he letting himself in for?

Chapter Five

Carmen was singing when Dash knocked on her door that evening. He could see her through the screen door, moving around her kitchen, cleaning up the pots and pans she'd probably used to make dinner, singing as she worked. He hadn't brought flowers this time, but he had driven to the next town to buy a box of condoms, so he was running just a little bit late. He stood with his hand raised to knock on the metal-framed screen, just listening to the beauty of her gorgeous alto voice. He wasn't sure what language—maybe Spanish or Italian—she was singing in, but he was suddenly rethinking his anti-opera stance.

It was her dog who finally noticed him, giving a soft woof of acknowledgement and nosing at the screen. Carmen stopped in the middle of her song and turned toward the door. "Dash? Is that you?"

"It is," he replied. He had to stop and remember that she couldn't see him from halfway across the room—it wasn't that he had a problem with Carmen's handicap—sometimes he just plain forgot about it.

"Well, come on in then," she said, turning away to set a pan in the dishwasher, which gave him a great view of her delectable ass as she bent over. "Don't be a stranger."

"Well, I never said I wasn't strange," he joked as he came in and set a sack of groceries down on the table. "But at least I'm a stranger bearing chocolate." He pulled a white cardboard bakery box out of the bag and set it on the counter. "Black Forest cake, if that's okay." He patted Silver's head, finally acknowledging the furry nose pushing at his leg. "No cake for you, buster."

Carmen's laugh was deep and rich, setting Dash's nerves tingling. He crossed to her in a few strides and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Chocolate is always welcome, and so are you. How was your day, Dash?"

"A whole lot better in the last minute or so," he answered before leaning down to kiss her.

Her lips were sweet, opening under his instantly, welcoming him. She tasted of garlic and chili peppers along with something sweet—maybe the lemon-lime soda he saw in a can on the counter. Most of all, she tasted like Carmen, and that made him hungry for more. By the time the kiss ended, he was breathing hard and she gasped, burying her face in his chest.

"I made fajitas," she mumbled into his shirt. "It's all in the oven keeping warm. Be a shame to let it get all dried out because we forgot to eat dinner."

"Be worth it," he replied with a grin. "But more civilized, I suppose, to have dinner first." He couldn't resist one last kiss to the top of her head before he opened his arms and stepped back.

Her lips quirked into a crooked smile. "I'm not sure civilized is always a good thing, but my stomach was growling ten minutes ago, so we should probably eat."

Dash followed her lead, helping move dishes to the table. "So what were you singing? Your voice is amazing."

"Thanks," she told him. "It was an aria from Puccini. My mother is a huge opera fan and passed it along to her daughters—which also explains the names Carmen and Aida. My sister is still convinced I got the better end of the deal, since everyone in Texas can at least pronounce Carmen."

"Have you ever sung professionally?"

Carmen shook her head. "Opera also requires physical acting—moving around on the stage, hitting your mark, not running into scenery. So I just sing for fun. Aida did some college theater musicals, but pre-med is pretty intensive, so she only did it for her first year or so."

"Your sister's a doctor?"

"Yep. Pediatrician, just like dear old dad." Her hands moved from dish to dish effortlessly as she loaded her homemade tortilla with meat, grilled peppers and fresh salsa, again demonstrating her excellent sense of spatial memory.

"I guess that means your dad's a physician too?"

"Yep. Runs a thriving practice in downtown Houston. My sister opened up a branch in San Antonio. Mom does the whole charity thing—board of directors for half a dozen foundations. Dad's professional confidence took a hit when his own daughter contracted meningitis and he couldn't save her sight, mind you, but after a while he recovered."

"So you weren't born visually impaired?" He chewed on a bite of his meal, enjoying the flavors of spices and meat and vegetables. Carmen was a hell of a lot better cook than he was.

"Nope. Dad was doing a stint down in Mexico for one of those international relief groups when I was little and he took us with him. Wasn't anticipating a meningitis outbreak. Since I was three, I have some vague memories of what the world looks like for other people. Honestly, I was lucky to survive, and being mostly blind is better than some of the other neurological damage that could have happened. A lot of patients end up in worse shape."

"Wow." The thought of her having been so sick chilled him, even though it had been decades earlier. He set down his fajita as his stomach briefly rebelled. "That must have been scary as hell for your parents."

"It was. Sort of like how your mother must have felt when you were shot and trapped in a burning warehouse?" She reached under the table and patted his knee. "We all have rough spots in our lives, you know. The key is to deal with it the best you can and keep on living. Otherwise the bad shit wins."

He felt his face warm in a flush. He could learn a lot about life from this resilient—not to mention sexy as hell—woman.

"Now on to more interesting topics," she said. "I was thinking of going riding tomorrow afternoon, maybe taking the eagle with me and releasing her. You said you usually take weekends off—you want to go on a picnic?" She'd introduced him yesterday to the pale gray mare that lived in the other end of her barn from her rehab patients.

Though he had doubts about the idea of riding a horse just for fun, Dash agreed. Any excuse to spend time alone with Carmen was a good one, besides, he'd hate to miss the eagle's release. They talked about the ranch for a bit, and then over dessert he ended up telling her about his work on the computer records and how, for the first time, he'd felt as if he really had something to contribute.

"That's great," she replied, forking up a bit of the rich chocolate cake he'd brought. "I know Leah hates the paperwork, so I'm sure she'll be happy to have you take over that aspect of the operation. See—you're starting to find your place. I hope that means you're planning to stay."

Dash's breath caught in his chest. He had been putting off the decision on whether to stay in Texas permanently. On the one hand, his mother and stepdad were in Chicago, along with all his friends and the only life he'd ever known. However, at least here he had a job, such as it was, and he wanted to spend more time getting to know Leah and Mac—not to mention Carmen.

"I don't have any plans to head back to Chicago," he answered carefully. "But I'm still not sure where the future will lead."

Her nod was easy and warm. "Of course. Living day by day is all any of us can ever really do, isn't it? No matter how much you plan your future, fate always seems to throw you a curve ball when you least expect it."

"You can say that again." Some of those curves could knock the hell out of him, but some, like meeting Carmen, made life just a little bit better. That he could finally see the good in life after the last several months was a huge step in the right direction.

* * * * *

Carmen was delighted to find there was no awkwardness this time when Dash followed her up to her bedroom. He'd helped her clean up after dinner then they'd checked on the eagle and even taken a short walk down the road to enjoy the evening breeze before returning to the cabin. As they walked up the driveway, he'd unselfconsciously pulled a gym bag from the passenger seat of his truck and slung it over his shoulder before taking her hand again to go back into the house. Silver padded along beside him as though walking around with a man were an everyday occurrence. Dash even patted the big dog's head and said good night before they headed up the stairs. It was both odd and oddly comfortable at the same time.

Still, there was nothing comfortable about the feelings that whipped through her body when Dash dropped his bag beside her bed and pulled her into his arms.

"I've been thinking about this all day," he said with a low groan as her breasts pressed up against his chest and his arms wrapped around her. "At least sitting behind a desk hid the fact I spent half the afternoon with a hard-on."

"You made it hard for me to think too," she whispered, running a hand along the smooth skin of his jaw. He'd shaved before coming over. "I'd start to do something then I'd remember last night, and a little while later I'd realize I'd forgotten whatever it was I should have been doing. I'd be standing there, panting and wet, and wanting you so badly it hurt."

"Oh Christ, don't say that, sweetheart. You're gonna make me come in my pants." He tilted his pelvis toward hers, pressing his erection into the soft flesh of her tummy.

"Wouldn't want that," she purred, though she couldn't help the thrill of pure feminine power that whipped through her at the thought of bringing this strong man to such a point. "Guess we'd better get you out of them."

Sliding her fingers down to the button-fly of his jeans, she made quick work of the fastenings before pushing the denim down to his ankles along with his cotton boxers.

Unable to resist, she ran her hand up and down his rigid length before pushing him down to sit on the edge of the bed and kneeling in front of him.

"Shoes first would have probably been smart," she murmured.

"Whatever you say, gorgeous." He leaned back on his hands as she lifted first one foot then the other, removing his brand-new cowboy boots and heavy cotton socks. Then she tugged his jeans and underwear the rest of the way off and moved up between his knees, laying one hand on each of his thighs. He'd pulled off his shirt while she was busy, and she leaned in to kiss the little wispy line of hair just above his navel, which pressed her chest up against his groin, teasing them both.

"You know, one thing I didn't do last night was find out how you taste," she murmured. She'd had a lick or two but nothing much. Now she wanted more. Taking his shaft in her hand, she ran her cheek along his length, inhaling his potent, musky scent. Holding him against her cheek, she nuzzled around the base of his cock, peppering his skin with tiny kisses as she went. Gently, she took one of his heavy testicles into her mouth, using her tongue to play with the smattering of crinkly hairs and skin while she sucked lightly at the taut orb. His low groan was enough to let her know he liked what she was doing, so she treated the other ball to the same attention, massaging his thick rod lightly with her hand all the while.

Once she was through exploring his testicles, she ran her tongue up along the broad ridge on his shaft. A network of slightly raised veins crisscrossed the smooth skin, and he more than filled her hand. When she reached the blunt crest, she licked her way around the underside of it before slurping up the bead of pre-cum that had formed at the slit. Wanting more of his salty, earthy taste, she dipped the tip of her tongue inside the narrow opening and was rewarded by his hands tightening in her hair.

"Carmen," he said on a ragged gasp. "Honey, I'm not going to last if you keep that up."

"Mm, good," she murmured, nibbling on his tip with her teeth sheathed by her lips. "I don't want you to last. I want you to come down my throat."

"You're kidding." His breathing was short and shallow, his muscles rigid. "You don't have to do that." Even as he said it, his hips bucked up, pushing his crown into her mouth.

Carmen sucked lightly then pulled away long enough to say, "I want to, Dash. Please." Then she took the crest deep into her mouth and began to draw rhythmically while one hand circled the base of his cock and stroked. The fingers of her other hand cradled his balls and played softly.

"Anything." He moaned. "Sweetheart." His hands in her hair helped her set the rhythm and pace he needed, and Carmen gloried in the scent and taste of his skin and the hard thickness of his cock in her mouth. Knowing she could bring this powerful man to such mindless passion was a bigger aphrodisiac than anything she'd ever experienced. Wetness slicked the inside of her thighs, and she couldn't help rubbing her engorged nipples against the crisp hair on his legs now and then as she bent her head over his lap. When he started bucking harder into her mouth with every stroke, she wondered if she could come too, just from giving him head—she was that aroused.

Pushing down so his crown was at the very back of her throat, she swallowed, easing him just a little farther in, and she knew the muscle contractions of her throat would caress him as she sucked hard. With a hoarse shout, Dash lifted his hips up off the bed and came, streams of hot fluid filling her mouth and throat as she swallowed repeatedly, drinking down every vital drop.

When he finally stopped coming, she pushed him back to lie on the bed, his knees still hanging over the edge. "Condoms...in the bag," he grunted, lying there with his cock still rock-hard and pointed at the ceiling.

Carmen fumbled in the bag beside her and found the box of rubbers. She grabbed one, opened it with her teeth then stood to roll it on over his undiminished erection. Desperate to feel him inside her, she climbed onto the bed, straddled his hips and lowered her aching pussy onto his rigid shaft.

"Oh yes," she murmured as he filled her deeply. His hands came up to cup her breasts, pinching her swollen nipples as she began to rock back and forth on his cock.

Her pelvis ground down on his in a way that rubbed her clit against his pubic bone each time she moved. Each time she lifted, it dragged his cock against her G-spot, spiking her arousal even higher. When he lifted his head to take one of her nipples into the wet heat of his mouth and sucked hard, she screamed out his name and bowed her spine as her body convulsed. Her fingers dug into the corded muscles of his shoulders as she rode out the climax, her inner muscles clamping down hard around his cock.

He bucked his hips beneath her and went rigid as well, a sweat breaking out on his skin as she felt him empty himself into the condom. Long moments later, she collapsed onto his broad chest, savoring the feel of his powerful arms holding her close.

"What is it about you?" he murmured into her hair. "Suddenly I feel sixteen again."

Carmen managed a shaky laugh that ended in a yawn. "Well, I'm sure as hell glad you're a grown-up." Laying her head on his shoulder, she fell asleep with him still nestled inside her.

Chapter Six

"You're absolutely sure this is a good idea?"

Carmen looked over at Dash, mounted on a big bay gelding named Moose, and grinned. He was so cute—she knew he was more worried about her than he wanted to admit, wondering if it was safe for her to be on horseback. Given that she was a far more experienced rider than he was, she couldn't help being amused.

"Grandfather and Leah have trained Ghost specifically for me since she was a foal," she told him. "She's the gentlest, calmest thing on four legs. She's also trained to stick closely to whichever other horse she's with. I promise, Dash, one thing I don't do is ride alone. I'm not unaware of my limitations." The little gray mare wasn't even spooked by Silver running alongside.

Dash snorted. "I wasn't worried about you." Since she knew his lie was intended kindly, she let it go. "I'm worried about *that*." She knew he was pointing at the third horse on a lead rope behind them with a large plastic animal carrier mounted to its saddle.

From inside the carrier, the eagle gave a short squawk, as if responding to Dash's concern. Carmen laughed. "She's fine too, worrywart. She'll be even better when we release her." They were riding up to the hilltop where Dash had found the eagle. She was fully recovered now, and it was always better to let wild creatures go as close as possible to the place where they'd been found. Since it was Sunday, and Dash took weekends off from all but the most pressing ranch duties, Carmen had recruited him to go with her instead of her grandfather. "I'm sure her mate will be happy to have her home."

"I'll bet," Dash agreed. "Especially if they have young."

Carmen had explained to him that both male and female parents would normally take turns feeding any babies and protecting their nest. With the female missing, the male would have been doing double-duty as well as leaving the nest unprotected while he hunted. While Dash didn't know much about Texas wildlife, he was interested and a quick learner. She was having fun teaching him as they got to know one another. They'd spent the last nights together, but this was the first time they'd actually left her property – almost like a date.

"I just hope we don't run into whatever idiot shot her in the first place," Dash continued. "Why on earth would anybody do that?"

"Well, a lot of farmers worry about them hunting chickens or young livestock," Carmen replied. "Though they'd much rather fish. Some people just get freaked out by other predators. Honestly, it never made much sense to me either."

"Any stories about eagles in one of your books?"

"Eagles are very important in Cherokee culture, but they're mainly war totems, and since my books are for kids, I haven't written one specifically about eagles. I do have one that features A-wo-ha-li, or Eagle, along with lots of other birds, reptiles and mammals." The tale had been a favorite of her great-grandmother's and retelling it always gave her a warm rush of memory.

"Tell me," he said, his voice a silky caress that was almost as warm as the Texas sun.

"Okay. It's about a ball game," she began, speaking just loudly enough to be heard over the steady beat of their horses' hooves. "The animals—the four-legged ones—challenged the birds to a game. Bear was the captain of their team, big and tough, and ready to take out anyone who got in his way. They also had Terrapin, whose sturdy shell would keep him safe—if he got the ball, no one would be able to get it away from him—and Deer, who could outrun everyone else. All through the dance before the game they bragged about their certain victory.

“Eagle was the captain of the bird team, and though he had Hawk and other strong fliers on his side, he was starting to get nervous. While they were getting ready for the game, two tiny animals, as small as mice, came running up the trunk where Eagle and Hawk were perched and asked if they could join in the game.

“Since they had four legs, Eagle asked them why they didn’t join the team down on the ground. The little mammals said they had, but Bear, Terrapin and Deer had just laughed and sent them away. Eagle thought this was unfair, but he knew he couldn’t let them join his team unless they could fly. Finally, one of the birds came up with an idea. They would make wings for their little friends. Using the skin from a drum and some cane splints, they made a set of wings and gave them to one of the animals, which is how Bat came to be. There wasn’t enough skin, though, to make wings for the other.

“Then someone thought of stretching the animal’s own skin, to make sort-of wings. Two birds on each side used their strong beaks to stretch and stretch the skin between the little animal’s front and back legs until it had flaps, enabling it to soar and glide, creating Flying Squirrel.

“When the game started, Flying Squirrel swooped in and grabbed the ball then carried it to a tree where he threw it to the other birds. They kept it in the air for a very long time, not even giving the four-legged animals a chance to get it back. When it did finally drop, Martin dove in to catch it before Bear could get there. He darted and dodged, avoiding all the other animals until he could throw it to the pole and win the game for the birds. As a thank-you, the other birds gave Martin a beautiful gourd for his nest, and that’s where he still likes to live today.”

Dash remained silent for several minutes after Carmen stopped talking. Finally she heard him let out a long, deep breath. “Wow. That was amazing. You could be a professional storyteller, as well as cook, writer, artist and opera singer. Is there anything you *don’t* do well?”

Basking in his regard, she laughed. "Well, I'm not terrific at driving a car." It was so freeing to be able to actually joke with someone about her disability. "And I think you learned at the wedding that I kind of suck at dancing."

"Nah, that was me," Dash replied, "and my gimpy leg. You were...perfect."

What the hell was she supposed to say to that? Fortunately for her crumbling defenses, she felt the ground beneath Ghost's feet level out as they reached the top of the hill where Dash had discovered the wounded bird. When he reined in his horse, Ghost drew to a stop beside the larger mount.

They both swung themselves out of the saddle then Carmen held on to their horses' reins while Dash untied the plastic airline kennel from the packhorse's back and set it on the ground, following Carmen's instructions.

"Okay, you're the one who rescued her, you set her free," Carmen said. "Just open the door of the carrier, with it pointed away from the horses, then step back so she doesn't feel threatened."

The latch clicked then Dash's boots thudded on the packed earth as he moved back to stand beside Carmen, laying his hand on her shoulder. She heard the soft scratch of the bird's talons on the newspaper lining the carrier, and then there was a loud, joyful screech and the flutter of powerful wings as she took to the sky.

"She's calling her mate," Carmen told Dash, blinking back tears. "We did good."

"*You* did. All I did was bring her to you." His voice was thick too, as if he had a lump in his throat. "Oh my god! There are two of them now, Carmen, circling each other."

She heard the male's welcoming cry and nodded. "Somebody's glad to see her home."

"That may be the single most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life." He pulled Carmen close against his side, and she felt his head tip down just as she lifted hers for his kiss. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

His lips covered hers before she could say, "Anytime." This kiss was hot and yet sweet at the same time. Carmen poured into it all the emotion she couldn't yet put into words, and it seemed to her as if Dash did the same. Of course that might just have been what she wanted to believe.

"You know, we're not far from my place," he said when they came up for air. "It's not much, but it's more or less home. Want to come see it?"

"I'd love to." She'd been in the shack before, back when it was actually used by ranch workers as an overnight stopping point. Grandfather had taken her with her sister and cousin for "campouts" there as children, though Aida had hated the dust and dirt of trail riding almost as much as Leah and Carmen had adored it. Carmen's big sister was a city girl, through and through. "But let's have our picnic here first."

Later, after a hearty lunch of fried chicken, Carmen's homemade biscuits and fresh fruit, they rode in a comfortable silence down the trail toward Dash's line shack. It wasn't really a shack, despite the name. The White Eagle maintained its properties better than that. The tidy cabin Carmen remembered had been small but pleasant, with two rooms, a full bath and a wide front porch.

She smelled bluebonnets as they rode up to the cabin and even saw the mass of indigo surrounding the dark brown blotch that was the house.

"There's a paddock out back," Dash said. "We can unsaddle the horses if you think you're going to be here for a while. There's even a sort of shelter with a bale of hay and a water trough."

"The idea of a line shack is so the hands can take shelter in a storm," she told him. "There has to be the means to care for their horses as well, just like there's always food and coffee inside for the cowboys."

"Was a half bottle of bourbon in the cupboard too," he stated wryly as they rode around the house toward the paddock. "Wonder if that's standard or just some cowboy's private stash."

When they reached the gate, he swung off his horse and opened it, leading his mount through on foot to the three-sided shelter. Ghost and the packhorse followed along. Once they were all inside, Dash stepped up to help Carmen down, sliding her torso slowly along his as he lowered her to the ground.

"Mm. I like the service here," she teased, her face tilted up toward his.

"Just wait 'til we get inside," he said. "Right now we'd better take care of the horses before we forget."

"Right." Going up on her tiptoes, she pressed a quick kiss to Dash's chin then turned to her horse. Even though Dash had the advantages of height and vision, she'd been doing this all her life while he was a greenhorn. By the time he'd finished removing the tack from Moose, she'd finished with both Ghost and the pack animal, and sent them both out into the paddock. While Dash tossed a few flakes of hay into the feed trough, she turned on the water tap. Dash had quickly picked up on giving her simple instructions such as "Two steps forward and one to your left" without having to hover over her every move. Once again they instinctively worked in tandem, each conscious of the other's every movement. As soon as their mounts were seen to, Dash caught Carmen's hand in his and led her to the back door of the line shack, Silver padding along behind them.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

The first scents she noticed were fresh pine and lemon disinfectant. Either Dash had planned to invite her back here or he kept his place sparkling clean—she'd bet on the latter. The main room was a big, open space with an oversized wooden table lined with benches and a couple of worn but comfy couches in front of the stone hearth. One corner held a stove, sink and refrigerator while a door in the opposite wall led to the bedroom and bath. It was simple and plain and something about it felt...sterile, reminding Carmen that Dash had still not committed to making this his home.

"Thirsty?" Dash asked after they'd both washed their hands in the kitchen sink. "I don't have a ton of groceries in the place, but I can manage water, soda and beer."

"A soda sounds great." She sat at one of the benches while he gathered drinks from the ancient fridge. Something sat on the table in front of her, and she reached out with one finger to see what it was.

"Oh, let me get that out of your way," Dash said, moving toward the table.

"What is it?" Carmen asked as she picked up the wooden...sculpture? She traced the lines of it with her hands and smiled. "It's a bear, isn't it? Where did this come from?"

"Therapy of a sort, I guess," he said as she heard him take a seat across from her. "My hands still aren't one hundred percent, so the docs suggested some kind of fine motor work while I'm sitting around in front of the TV at night."

"*You* whittled this?" she ran her hands over it again, admiring the clear shape of the bear. It was simplified, almost a fetish, but the snout, legs and humped back were distinctive and the proportions were perfect. "This is great."

"When I was a kid, my mom used to leave me with the lady in the next apartment while she worked. Mrs. Jones had her father living with her, so the old guy became kind of a surrogate grandfather. He couldn't walk much by then, so whittling was one thing he could still do, and he showed me the basics. I hadn't done any in years. I was supposed to find something to do with my hands and there was this big old woodpile alongside the house." The sounds of him pouring the drinks accompanied his words.

"Then this is really fantastic," she enthused. "This isn't your first piece, is it?"

"No. A couple of the first attempts went back into the woodpile, but there are a few better ones over on the mantel. I'll get them for you in a minute. I was going to send this one to my brother Nate. He's a huge Chicago Bears fan."

"And is it helping your hands?" She set the bear down when he placed a glass in front of her.

"Some. The computer work at the ranch seems to be exercising them too; just as all the riding is getting some strength back in the leg."

They chatted idly as they drank then Carmen washed the glasses while Dash dried them and put them away since the shack didn't boast a dishwasher. After that, they moved over to the hearth where Silver was already snoozing on a thick rag rug.

"Here's the first one I kept," Dash said. He reached up and took down a sculpture about eight inches long, slender and undulating.

"Rattlesnake," she said. "Diamondback...you've even got the pattern worked into its back and the rattle on its tail."

"It was a fairly easy shape to start with." He took the snake and handed her another, this one mostly triangular in shape.

"Coyote." It was the traditional fetish pose, with the animal sitting on its haunches and pointing its face up at the moon.

"Very good. I tried to do one of Silver, but it didn't come out right, so that one went into the kindling bucket." He reached for another and traded it for the coyote in her hand. "This one is for Leah...a welcome-home gift."

The spindly legged foal was perfect...its legs knobby and slightly splayed, its mane curling on its long neck and ears pricked. "She'll love it," Carmen assured him. "You've got a real gift, Dash."

"Nothing like yours," he said as he replaced the foal on the mantelpiece. "But I'm glad you like them."

"Don't belittle your talent," she told him, reaching up to tug on both his ears, bringing his face down to hers. "You do lots of things well."

"Yeah?" This time sensuality whipped through his tone, and she could sense his smile. "Like what?"

"Like this." She pulled him closer so she could plant a kiss on his warm, sexy lips.

"Mm. I must have been inspired." He took control of the kiss, his tongue thrusting deep into her welcoming mouth.

Before Carmen even knew what had happened, their clothes were scattered about the living room floor, and she was glad Dash had thought to stuff a condom into the pocket of his jeans. She knelt on the floor with her torso on the cushions of the wide sofa, the tweedy fabric rough against her nipples, while Dash was on his knees between her feet, and slowly filled her from behind.

"I was hoping to make it to the bedroom." He pushed into her with slow, sure strokes.

"Next time," she said on a long exhale. "This is...nice."

"Oh hell, nice is too pale a word, sweetheart. This is fucking phenomenal."

"Uh-huh," was all she could manage.

Sweeping her hair off to one side, he leaned over and sucked on the spot where her neck curved into her shoulder. It was one of those erotic zones she'd never realized she had before Dash had discovered it, and she felt her vaginal muscles squeeze down on his cock. She tilted her hips up, inviting him even deeper.

"You have the prettiest damn ass I've ever seen. Did you know that?" His words were clipped and he dragged in a breath between every three or four.

"No," she gasped. "Feel. Free. To. Tell. Me."

"Going to fuck it one of these days," he muttered then added, "if you want."

"Hell yes," she groaned. She'd never actually tried that before, but with Dash she wanted everything. She wanted him to possess her in every way humanly possible. "Go ahead."

"Not now." He pistoned his steely erection into her wet, clinging cunt. "Too close."

What he did do was wet his finger with saliva — she heard the damp pop as he stuck it in his mouth — and he pressed it up against the rosette of her anus.

"Oh Dash," she moaned. The extra stimulation was exquisite. Then he pushed it an inch or so inside her sphincter and she squealed with delight. The extra fullness sent her arousal soaring. Apparently it worked for him too. Dash slammed himself deep and

shuddered. He nipped down on her shoulder as he came, and that, on top of everything else, hurled her over the edge. Her climax roared through her, making her ears ring and all the breath whoosh from her lungs. Sparks flared behind her eyelids while her body quivered on and on and on.

Eventually she realized she needed to breathe, but it was tough with Dash slumped over her back. He must have figured that out too because he pulled out of her and stood then used the hand that hadn't been inside her to help her to her feet.

"What do you say to a shower together before we head back to your place?"

"I'd say you read my mind," she said as they staggered together toward the bathroom.

* * * * *

Later, as they rode back toward Carmen's house where Dash had left his pickup and the ranch horse trailer for Moose, she felt a weird prickling sensation on the back of her neck.

"Dash, do you see anybody else out here?" she asked. "I'm kind of getting the feeling there's somebody or something watching us."

"You too? I thought it was just me being paranoid." He drew Moose to a halt and she could tell he was looking and listening, using all his training as a cop and the instincts that had made him a good one. Even Silver seemed to be on alert, though he hadn't growled or gone after anything.

Finally, Dash nudged Moose back into a walk, which Ghost automatically matched. "Nobody here as far as I can tell."

Carmen shrugged. "Just our imaginations, I guess."

"Yeah, well, after Leah getting shot a few months ago, I'm less sure that it's safe out here," Dash grumbled. "I'm definitely staying with you tonight unless you want to come back to my place."

She smiled. "Well, either one is fine, but I think we're overreacting."

"Probably." He didn't mean it. She could tell he was still watching the horizon.

Confident in the fact Dash would never let anyone hurt her, she relaxed, determined to enjoy whatever time with him she could.

Chapter Seven

"Have you heard about anybody hanging out on the ranch where they're not supposed to be?" Dash was riding out with Mac on Monday morning, checking fences again. The plan for the next few days was for him to work outside in the mornings with Mac then handle the office tasks in the afternoon. To Dash's mind, it sounded like the ideal combination. Ever since his ride with Carmen yesterday he'd had that weird, prickling feeling at the back of his neck—even today, out on the trail with Mac.

"Not since Grant Fallon went to prison for shooting both Leah and J—our—oh hell, I still can't comfortably call him our father." Mac shook his head in disgust.

"Me either," Dash agreed. "And it's probably just me being twitchy, but have you gotten the feeling lately that there's somebody out here, watching us?"

Mac paused, his head tilted slightly to one side as he thought. Slowly, he nodded. "Not before, but today? Yeah, a little."

"I rode out yesterday with Carmen Whitefeather. She let me go with her to help release that injured eagle I found," Dash added hurriedly when Mac cast him a funny look. "She felt the same thing. Even her dog was spooked."

"Well, there is always the possibility of poachers," Mac reminded him. "Could be whoever shot the bird in the first place wants another go at it. There's always someone who's convinced the birds are after their chickens or toy poodle or something, or some asshole who just feels more macho by shooting things."

Dash wasn't entirely convinced, but he nodded. "If you say so."

"Anyway, we'll keep our eyes open and let the rest of the hands know, just in case," Mac continued. "That's about all we *can* do really."

"Yep."

"So on to more pleasant topics, Leah and Shane get home tomorrow."

"Uh-huh." What was Mac up to now?

"Well, I know they want us to come up to the ranch house for dinner tomorrow, but I was thinking we needed to do something a little bigger, you know? So, how about a welcome-back party at Hell's Bells the night after?"

Dash raised one eyebrow. "You sure they'll want to go out drinking and partying right after they get back from their honeymoon?" Hell's Bells was the name of Mac's bar, the business he'd built for himself. It was a nice enough place—exactly the way Dash had imagined a western honky-tonk—but Dash still preferred to avoid social gatherings. He was reluctant enough to go to Leah's coming-home dinner at the ranch.

Mac grinned. "I know Shane. He's gonna want to show off his good luck for the whole town to see. So, I can count on you to show up, right?"

"I guess." He hid a grimace and nudged his horse into a faster walk.

* * * * *

"So, about Leah's dinner tonight," Carmen said as they ate breakfast the next morning. After just a week it seemed normal to be feeding Dash before he left for the ranch. "Are you going?" It would be the first time they'd gone anywhere since they'd been sleeping together, and she was twitchy as a sixteen-year-old at her first Sadie Hawkins dance. If her body wasn't still humming from this morning's lovemaking, she'd have been even more nervous.

"I guess," he answered slowly. "You?"

"Planned on it," Carmen answered. "Grandfather's going too. He offered to come pick me up, if you didn't want to come back here between work and dinner." Of course she was hoping Dash would insist on driving her to the dinner. He'd need to shower and change anyway, and he could do that here as well as in the bunkhouse at the ranch.

The only sound that broke the silence was Dash chewing a bite of waffles. Finally he swallowed a gulp of coffee and said, "I guess I'll see you there then."

Okay, this is going well. Carmen's pleasant anticipation of the evening ahead dimmed considerably. Apparently he didn't want anyone to know they were seeing each other. That pretty well explained why they hadn't gone out for dinner a single time, even though he'd spent the last five nights at her house, rocking her world. He wasn't the first guy she'd slept with who'd wanted to keep it a secret. She'd just thought Dash was a better caliber of man than Johnny Dowling or Brett Beck, two men she'd dated briefly in Houston when she'd lived with her parents. Johnny had fucked her then never spoken to her again, moving on to date one of her former best friends. Brett had been the one who admitted outright that while Carmen was an all-right lay, she wasn't someone he'd want to show off to his friends or family, even if her father was rich enough to almost compensate for her personal shortcomings.

She'd moved here to Morgan's Creek shortly thereafter.

Not this time. If Dashiel Hyde was ashamed to be seen with Carmen, he could just take a god damn hike.

Before she could work herself up into an even bigger lather, Dash's cell phone chirped. He stepped away from the table before flipping it open. "Hey, Captain, what's up?" There was a long pause while he listened to the voice on the other end.

"Fuck." The single word was infused with a wealth of emotions, ranging from anger to dread. Something bad had happened. "Why the hell didn't anyone notify me immediately?"

Another pause.

"Okay, I get that—even you're entitled to a vacation now and then, but surely one of those fuckwads in the department could have given me a call."

After another few moments, Dash sighed. "All right. I'll let the ranch hands know. You call the local cops for me, okay? Make it all official. And thanks, Captain. I appreciate the warning."

"What's wrong?" Carmen forgot all about her hurt and anger at Dash for a moment, concerned only with the roiling emotions that radiated from where he stood.

Dash came back to the table and chugged down the rest of his coffee. "You know that feeling we both had the other day of being watched?"

"Yeah?" She had a sinking feeling she knew where this was going.

"I told you about my injuries—that I was shot and left in a burning warehouse, right?"

"A little."

"Well, my partner—a good man with a wife and kids—didn't make it. Neither did one of the gangbangers. A career thug named Carlos Arroyo. The uniforms who arrived for backup did manage to catch Arroyo's older brother Luis. During his trial, it came out that it was my bullet that killed Carlos, and in typical gangbanger style, Luis swore revenge."

"So, I'm betting that call from your captain was to tell you that Luis has escaped and they think he might have followed you to Texas."

"Pretty much," he admitted. "I don't suppose you'd consider going to visit your parents in Houston for a few weeks?"

Carmen shook her head, though she was warmed by his concern. "If he's been watching you for several days, then he already knows about me," she reminded him. "But I promise I will be careful. Will you promise me the same?"

"I'm always careful." He set his plate down on the floor for Silver, indicating his appetite had fled, just as hers had. "I'm still going to ask your grandfather to keep an eye on you during the day, along with his big-ass shotgun."

"I'm a big girl, Dash, but if it will make you feel better, then fine. Grandfather can help with the deer and the rabbit that came in yesterday." She had two new patients in the barn, which Dash had already helped her feed and water this morning. "Maybe he can even run me into town for a haircut and to get my nails done before dinner tonight."

"Don't cut it," Dash replied immediately. Then he chuckled. "Sorry, knee-jerk reaction. I like your hair, but it's up to you of course."

Carmen smiled. She was still pissed at him, but maybe, just maybe there was still hope. "Just a trim, I promise."

She rinsed plates and loaded the dishwasher while Dash called her grandfather and explained the situation. Of course the man never mentioned that he was standing in her kitchen making the call—he just told Ken that the killer might have seen them riding together the other day. Carmen tapped her foot impatiently. Pretty damn soon, Mr. Hyde was in for a long, long talk—or else he could find somewhere else to sleep.

Silver whined and licked her hand, sensing her emotional turmoil, just as Dash hung up. "Your grandfather is one spooky old man. Don't know how he knew I was here with you, but he said to tell you he'd be over in an hour or so."

Carmen shrugged. "I've never understood how he knows stuff. He just does."

"Will you wait inside until he gets here? Please?" He stepped over and took her hands in his.

"Since you asked nicely, fine. But I won't be a prisoner in my own home, Dash."

"I know." He leaned down and kissed her, first on the forehead then the tip of her nose then a gentle, butterfly-soft kiss to her lips. "I'm going to go talk to the sheriff today. If Arroyo is here, we'll find him and get his ass back to jail, I promise."

"You be careful too," she reminded him. "You're the one he's after, remember. Watch your back, Dash. Promise me *that*."

"Cross my heart." With one more soft kiss, he turned on his heel and picked up his duffel bag as he headed out the door. "See you tonight, sweet thing."

Carmen turned back to the dishes. How the hell was she supposed to stay mad at him when he said things like that?

* * * * *

The first thing Dash did after leaving Carmen's house was to drive into town to meet with the sheriff, who'd been briefed by Captain Brady. All the deputies were on alert, the sheriff confirmed, as well as the neighboring ranches. Then Dash headed for the ranch where he informed Mac and Mick, the foreman, as well as all the hands. Mick made sure all the White Eagle hands were riding armed and in pairs. There wasn't much more they could do.

When Leah arrived in the barn shortly after noon, they filled her in, and then Dash spent a few hours with her, going over the computer records, which she had gladly ceded to him after deciding he knew what he was doing. Dash taking over some of the day-to-day business of the ranch operations would free her up to expand her horse-training business, she'd admitted, which was what she really wanted to be doing.

Mac, they'd all agreed, would help out at the ranch on an as-needed basis since he had his own business to run, but in exchange for lighter duties, he'd take a proportionately lower share of the profits. When Mac had made that suggestion, Leah and Dash had argued at first—White Eagle Ranch was his heritage too, but Mac had stood firm. Finally they had worked out a deal they could all live with—Mac would get more than he wanted, but part of his share would be invested back into the ranch. Frankly, after they'd hashed things out, Dash had been proud as hell to call them both his siblings. He finished the afternoon by riding out with Leah to show off some of the fence work he and Mac had done in her absence.

He couldn't help a pang of guilt when he showered in the bunkhouse after the day's work and headed up to the ranch house for dinner with the newlyweds. Should he have gone and picked up Carmen? He'd wanted to, but wasn't sure how Leah would take the notion that her half brother was sleeping with her cousin, and he didn't think her welcome-home dinner was the right place to spark a family feud.

"Nice to see you again, Dash," Carmen said coolly when she arrived on her grandfather's arm, Silver padding protectively alongside her.

He honestly did not know what to say. He could tell she wasn't pleased with him—and he wasn't really proud of himself either. Part of him wanted nothing more than to lean in and kiss her—he'd been missing her all day. But with Leah and Ken both watching like hawks, he settled for a quick peck on her cheek. "How are your patients doing?"

"Yeah, I want to hear all about that eagle Dash rescued," Leah interjected, pulling Carmen off to the other side of the room while Dash accepted a beer from Shane, who was conversing with Mac. "And you have to see the adorable foal he carved for me as a present."

"And I want to hear more about this psycho who may have followed you from Chicago," Shane growled.

"Look, if you want me to leave the ranch until Arroyo is apprehended, I will," Dash said.

"No," Mac and Shane replied at once.

"I just want to know as much as I can," Shane added. "And I'm doing my best to convince Leah to stay close to the house. You'd think she'd learn after being shot once."

"Both of my granddaughters are stubborn women," Ken agreed, joining the other men. "That's something the men in their lives will have to learn to deal with, I'm afraid. They get it from their grandmother." He accepted a beer as well and took a long swig.

Shane nodded. "I know—I'm working on it. It's hard after almost losing her to a bullet."

Dash didn't say anything, though he knew Ken's words were as much for him as for Shane. Funny, Carmen's stubborn streak wasn't even a factor in his concerns about their relationship and where it was headed. If anything, he loved—liked—her the more for her independent attitude, even in the face of her handicap.

No. He choked on his beer and coughed for a bit while Mac pounded on his back. He'd meant love, *damn it*. Surrounded by a dinner party was a hell of a time to realize he was in love with a woman who was far too good for a broken-down wretch like him.

Especially since there was a gunman out there trying to kill him. No, any thoughts about love were just going to have to wait.

Unfortunately, the night only got worse.

After dinner, Leah and Shane led them out to the yard where Shane had built a bonfire. The sight and crackle of the flames made his skin crawl. He knew he had to get past his fear of fire sometime, but so far he hadn't even been able to build a fire in his own hearth. Even the barbecue at Carmen's had taken conscious effort to work with. Maybe he should have listened to the doctors and his captain about seeing a shrink. Instead he sat on a lawn chair, as far back from the flames as he could.

Carmen sat next to Leah, shooting occasional dagger glances at Dash. He wanted to go to her, but every time he tried to move his feet, his stomach knotted up and he broke out in a sweat. How the hell was he supposed to tell her he loved her in the middle of a crowd, and how was he supposed to say anything else to her when those were the only words running through his mind?

Finally, Mac stood up, claiming he had to be in town by ten to relieve someone at the bar. He'd already gotten everyone to agree to the party at Hell's Bells the following evening.

"Can I catch a lift, Mac?" Carmen asked. "It's not far out of your way. That way, Grandfather can stay a little longer with Leah."

Mac agreed, taking Carmen's arm as they said goodbye to the newlyweds.

"I'll be by your place at dawn," Ken said to Carmen, coming over to kiss her cheek and shake Mac's hand. "Don't go out to feed your patients until I get there."

"I won't," she assured him. Without a word to Dash, she whirled and left.

Moments later, Ken pulled up a chair next to Dash. "So," the older man said quietly, so Leah and Shane couldn't hear. A few of the hands had joined them for the bonfire and were crowded around Leah, talking horses. "You ashamed to be seen with my granddaughter?"

"What?" Dash's beer fell to the ground as he jerked in response and his gimpy hand refused to grip properly. "Hell no!"

"Then want to explain why she came here with me and left with your brother?"

Dash rubbed his hands across his eyes. "Because I'm an ass."

Ken's short bark of laughter was a relief. At least he didn't sound as if he were about to shoot Dash where he stood. "Can't argue with that, my boy."

"It's just...you did know Leah threatened my life if I hit on Carmen, right? And this is her party. Plus, the more time I spend with Carmen, the better chance Arroyo will get her in his sights when he's looking for me." God, it sounded lame as hell when he said it out loud.

The older man just nodded thoughtfully. "Women are strange critters, boy. Not going to argue with you there. And I can't say you're wrong to try to keep her safe. Just don't forget to take her feelings into account. Right now I'd say she's hurting. It wouldn't be the first time she dated someone who wasn't man enough to be seen with her in public."

"What? You're fucking kidding me." That was ludicrous! What man in his right mind would be ashamed of Carmen?

"Nope. So keep that in mind when you see her at that party she doesn't want to go to any more than you do tomorrow."

With little more than a whisper of movement, Ken left his side and was across the fire, talking to Shane and Leah.

Well, he'd messed that the hell up, hadn't he? His head pounding and his leg aching, he said his goodbyes and climbed into his truck. Knowing he had to make things right, he turned at the last minute and headed to Carmen's instead of his shack. Odd how that felt a whole lot more as if he were headed home.

Chapter Eight

Carmen fumed as she sat beside Mac in his truck with Silver in the back of the crew cab. Dash had barely bothered to acknowledge her tonight—just as she'd figured he would. How could she have gone and fallen head over heels in love with such an ass?

A little voice in the back of her brain reminded her that she hadn't exactly been open about their relationship in front of Leah either. Damn, she hated it when her innate honesty got in the way of a good mad.

"Can you drop me at Dash's shack instead of at my place?" she asked Mac.

Mac laughed. "Wondered if either of you was going to cop to being involved with each other." Then he sobered and added, "But I'm not sure it's a good idea. You heard all the discussion about that gangbanger who's after him."

Carmen shrugged. "If he's been watching Dash, he knows about my place too. I'm as safe at one as I am at the other. And I've got Silver with me."

Mac sighed. "At least call Dash and let him know."

"No," she argued. "But if it makes you feel better, I'll call my grandfather."

"Fair enough." Mac took the turn-off for the line shack rather than the one to her cabin. "Because if anything happens to you, they'll both be standing in line to kill me—right behind Leah."

"Nothing's going to happen, Mac." Except that she was going to either jump Dash's bones or rip him a new one. She hadn't quite decided which yet.

Line shacks weren't usually kept locked since their purpose was to provide shelter for any of the ranch hands who needed it. Mac insisted on walking her inside and waiting while she called her grandfather, who agreed to check on the bunny and deer on his way home. Once Mac was sure she was as safe as she could get, he left, and

Carmen wandered around the main room of the little cabin, going over and over possible conversations with Dash in her head.

Finally she sat down at the table and picked up his current carving, running it through her fingers to determine what it was.

"It's an eagle," she told Silver, tracing the spread wings of the bird in flight. It was *their* eagle, she knew, just as she somehow knew he'd intended it as a gift for her. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyelids. He did care about her. His love was in every line of the wooden sculpture.

She'd reluctantly set it down to wipe her eyes when Silver began to growl, running to the cabin's back door and snarling violently.

"What is it, boy?" As if she didn't know. She'd never heard her dog this angry. Slowly she sank down behind the table and pulled her cell phone from her pocket, glad that at least here by the road there was a signal. The first number she hit was Dash's, but it went straight to voicemail. He was probably on the road and out of signal range.

The second number she dialed was the ranch. They were closer than the sheriff.

"Hello?" Shane's voice answered just as the back door was flung open. Silver snarled and she heard him launch himself at the killer, heard the man scream.

"I'm at Dash's," she whispered.

A shot rang out and Silver's barking ended in a soft yelp followed by a thud. A sob burst from her throat. *Not Silver!*

"We're on our way, Carmen," Shane assured her, reminding her she still held the phone to her ear. "Hold on, sweetie. Do whatever you have to in order to stay alive. Cavalry is coming."

"It's me," came Leah's voice over the phone. "I'm staying here while the menfolk come running. Dash should be home any minute—he left not long after you did. Now set the phone somewhere where he won't see it, and tell us as much as you can without giving it away."

Carmen slid the phone under the edge of the cupboard just as the killer rounded the table and spotted her.

"Perfect," the bastard snarled. "Nothing like bait."

Carmen couldn't see his face, of course, just the blur of a man in dark clothing. Without needing to see, she knew he had a gun pointed at her—the same one he'd used to shoot her dog.

"What...what do you want?"

"Hyde's head on a fucking plate." The man had a Latino accent, but not the same one she was used to locally.

"You and me both," she muttered.

There was the sound of a chair being dragged across the floor. "Now get up real slow, *puta*, and have a seat."

"I can't see," she said. "Didn't anybody tell you I was blind?" It was a stalling tactic—she could have felt her way around and probably found the chair—but she figured she'd use anything she could to delay him. Besides, it wouldn't hurt if he underestimated her because of her handicap. "You shot my leader dog—you'll have to show me where to go."

"Nah, it'll be more fun to watch you fumble," he said with a nasty laugh. "Chair's right in the middle of the room. Find it."

Carmen stood and felt for the edge of the table. Moving as slowly as she could manage, she made her way around it. "My name is Carmen," she told him. Wasn't she supposed to try to make him see her as a person? She'd heard that on one cop show or another that her sister watched.

"Like I care, bitch. Now shut the fuck up and move faster before I decide to shoot you first and tie you up later."

So much for that idea. Letting go of the table, she took cautious steps out into the center of the room, her hands out in front of her. A few seconds later, her fingers grazed the back of a wooden chair.

"Sit."

She did.

"Hands behind your back."

Carmen didn't know what else to do, so she complied, still moving in slow motion. There was a dark blur beside her head, and she could smell the machine oil and gunpowder of his pistol.

A pair of handcuffs snicked closed around her wrists, cold and metallic, binding her arms behind her. The position was a strain since her arms were barely long enough to meet behind the frame of the chair. A quick tug proved he'd tucked the chain of the cuffs through one of the spindles, giving her even less possibility of movement. Thug he might be, but apparently he wasn't stupid.

Once she was secured, she heard him open the back door and drag something inside. More footsteps followed, along with a series of sloshes and splashes. The acrid odor of gasoline filled her nostrils.

Carmen fought to keep from vomiting as she realized he meant to burn the cabin down—with her in it. That was the bait for Dash—not just her, but her on fire. She knew he still had issues with flames. She'd seen it tonight. Watching her burn would be his worst nightmare come true.

While Arroyo was distracted, she tried to scoot her chair backward, just a few inches, toward the table. If she could eventually make it to the back door, she might get out of this alive. Someone should have warned Dash by now, surely.

When the killer went into the bedroom to dump more gasoline, she scooted back another foot or so. And then she heard it—a soft, gentle whine. Silver was alive!

Before she could move any farther, Arroyo returned. "I'll just wait out here on the porch where it smells better," he said, laughing again. "Can't wait 'til your boyfriend shows up so we can start the party."

* * * * *

Dash was confused when he reached Carmen's house and she wasn't home. Had she gone to her grandfather's after all? It didn't seem like a good idea to try to call Ken and find out. Disappointed, he returned to his truck and headed for the line shack.

He was out on the main road, about halfway between his place and Carmen's when his cell phone rang, and he knew, somehow, that something was terribly wrong.

"Arroyo is at your place," Shane announced without preamble. "And he's got Carmen."

The bottom fell out of Dash's stomach and he had to stop his truck for a minute while he heaved onto the side of the road. As soon as he was done, he reached into the back of his truck for his bullet-proof vest. He'd worn it riding out today, after hearing that Arroyo might be on the loose.

"Sheriff is maybe ten minutes out," Shane replied. "Ken, the hands and I should be there in five."

"Two for me," Dash told them. "I'm the one he wants. I'll go in and see if I can trade myself for her."

"Don't do anything stupid." Ken's voice came on the line. "Take care of my granddaughter—but take care of yourself too."

"I'll do my best," Dash assured them. "That's all I can promise." He climbed back into the cab and floored it for home.

* * * * *

Carmen heard the truck coming up the road before her captor. Since he'd moved out onto the porch, she'd managed to inch back to the table. At the sound of his

delighted roar, she jerked back, tipping her chair sideways and slamming her head into the floor as she fell. Her leg rattled the table and something fell off onto her cheek.

The carved eagle. Once again she could feel Dash's love in every line. With renewed determination she tucked it under her chin and used her legs to push herself under the table and toward the back door. Meanwhile Silver inched toward her, whimpering as his claws scrabbled on the wood floor.

"So, *pendejo*, you finally show your fucking face." Arroyo's voice was harsh and loaded with manic violence.

Carmen heard footsteps as Dash approached. She momentarily stopped her efforts to scoot toward the back door. "Where's my woman, motherfucker?" Even amidst all this, she couldn't help a moment of warmth at hearing him call her his.

"In the house. Take this, asshole." Arroyo jumped off the porch and sent his lit cigarette through the door. Carmen couldn't see it, but she'd smelled him smoking, and she heard the whoosh as the butt ignited the gasoline poured over the floor and furniture. Her scream erupted even as she forced herself to move. She had to get out of there fast—he'd poured some on her as well. She'd burn as quickly as everything else.

Her hands found Silver and she touched his head, searching mentally for his wound. When she found it, she poured all her healing power into him, mending it as best as she could. The bullet was still lodged in his hip—Shane would have to dig that out later if they lived through this.

Silver struggled to his feet and took the wooden chair back into his powerful jaws, pulling Carmen toward the back door as the flames erupted around them.

Over it all, she heard Arroyo laugh then Dash's beloved voice as he shouted something at their attacker. Then there was the sound of a gunshot, more laughter and the door of the truck closing as the vehicle roared off into the night.

The laughter had been Arroyo's. Dash was shot.

Carmen was devastated, but she still wanted to live. If he wasn't dead, maybe she could help him as she had Silver. Once she was out of the cabin, there'd at least be hope.

She used her feet to help Silver move her toward the door just as she heard footsteps run up to the porch.

"Carmen!"

It was Dash's voice she heard just as Silver pulled her out the back. Joy surged through her just before her head hit the step and she blacked out. She couldn't even tell Dash that she was safe.

* * * * *

Dash saw the dark shadow of a man with the burning dot of a cigarette on his front porch as soon as he drove up to the line shack. There was no sign of Carmen. Please, god, let him not have already killed her. Anything but that. His hands in the air, he had his pistol tucked into the back of his belt.

"So, *pendejo*, you finally show your fucking face." Arroyo's Puerto Rican accent was stronger than it should have been considering the man had been born and reared in Chicago. Some of the gangs liked to exaggerate their speech, just to make themselves stand out.

Dash approached the porch slowly and saw the pistol in the hand that wasn't holding the cigarette. "Where's my woman, motherfucker?"

"In the house." With a flick of his fingers, Arroyo sent the cigarette butt arcing through the open doorway. "Take this, asshole."

Dash's world about ended when he saw the flames erupt and heard Carmen's scream. Then he heard the shot just a second before he felt the impact in his gut that sent him flying back onto his ass in the gravel drive. "Son of a bitch!"

"Watch her burn as you bleed out, *cabron*." With that, Arroyo walked toward Dash's truck, aiming a hard kick at Dash's head as he moved past and spitting down into Dash's face. "That was for my brother. Die slowly." With one more kick, he stepped over Dash's stunned figure and got in the truck, which Dash had left running.

Before Dash could catch his breath, the vehicle slammed into gear and peeled out of the drive, spewing a rain of gravel into Dash's face.

"Carmen!" he roared as soon as his breath returned. Being shot in the vest kept him from dying, but it still knocked the wind out of him, and it took him way too damn long to regain his feet.

Fire. Instinctively he cringed away from the heat of the orange and yellow flames flickering out the open front door of the shack. It was his worst nightmare come back to haunt him, only this time the nightmare was for real. Dash wanted more than anything to run as far and fast as his gimpy leg could carry him.

But Carmen was in there.

And she'd become more important to him than anything else in the world.

He staggered up into the house, looking for her. The flames licked at his clothes as he pushed through the smoke-filled room. Then he heard Silverfoot bark.

"Where is she, boy?" Dash followed the sound of the barking to the back door, beating out embers that landed on his clothing as he went.

When he reached the door, he sighed with relief as he saw that she was outside, though still far too close to the inferno that had briefly been his home. She was also cuffed to a chair and ominously still. He jumped down onto the packed dirt, ignoring the stabbing pain in his bad leg, and grabbed the chair, pulling her out into the horse paddock, well away from the house.

Just then he heard the sounds of other vehicles coming up the road. He slumped onto the grass beside Carmen and laid his head next to her face. Her breath was shallow, but nothing had ever felt better against his cheek.

He pulled her, chair and all, onto his lap and held on tight while Silver stood beside them and licked each of their faces alternately. There was something under her chin and he lifted it away, recognizing it as the eagle he'd just finished carving for her. Tears filled his eyes that she'd worked so hard to save such a simple gift. Damn, why

wouldn't she wake up? She had to be all right. She simply had to or Dash wasn't sure he could survive.

"Dash!"

"Carmen!"

Shane and Ken yelled at once from the front of the cabin, though Dash could barely hear them over the roar of the flames.

"Around back," he shouted, not sure whether they could hear. "We're safe."

Silverfoot got up and limped his way around the house, barking loudly.

A few seconds later, the sound of running footsteps heralded the arrival of Ken, Shane and Mick, followed by several of the hands.

"Everybody out?" Ken barked as Shane knelt beside them to feel Carmen's pulse.

"Yeah," Dash wheezed, still reeling a bit from being shot in the stomach and kicked in the head, as well as the after burn of an adrenaline rush. "Silver pulled her out. Don't know why she's unconscious."

A soft moan from Carmen was one of the sweetest things he'd ever heard. "Dash? You okay?"

He buried his face in her hair while somebody went running for a pair of bolt cutters to get her out of the chair. "I'm fine, sweetheart. It's you we're worried about."

"Hit my head when Silver pulled me out the door," she muttered. "You...you ran into a fire to save me."

"Yeah. Turned out the furball here had already gotten you out."

"But you hate fire."

"Not as much as I love you."

She blinked up at him and smiled. "I love you too."

Ken cleared his throat. "I know you've better things to talk about, but are either of you hurt?"

Dash shook his head, though he coughed, having inhaled just a little bit of smoke.

"Just a bump on the head," Carmen assured them. "I think I blacked out mostly from overusing my healing ability." Her eyes flew wider as she looked around at Silver. "Shane—check Silver's hip. I think I healed the bullet inside it."

"We'll take care of our four-legged hero," Shane assured her. "I just hope the police caught Arroyo. He zipped past us, but since we saw the flames, we were more worried about getting here than stopping him."

"Umm, Doc, I wouldn't worry about that," said one of the hands, who had just trudged up to the crowd as another couple of truckloads of men arrived. By now, most of the hands were working with buckets and the sirens grew closer, but Dash knew they wouldn't be in time to save the shack. It didn't matter, not as long as Carmen was safe.

"Saw his truck coming toward us, like a bat outta hell." The hand jerked his thumb toward Dash, to indicate that it was his pickup. "Was about to hit the ditch just to get out of his way when the damndest thing happened. Big ol' eagle swooped right down in front of the pickup and screamed louder than anything I ever heard. Bastard ran right off the road into a tree. We stopped to pull him out, but he was deader 'n a doornail."

"But eagles don't fly at night," Carmen whispered.

Ken sighed. "You know that, granddaughter, and so do I. But apparently your feathered friend forgot to read the textbook."

Chapter Nine

By the time the paramedics had pronounced both of them more or less fit, and the sheriff had gotten all the information he needed, it was close to dawn when Dash and Carmen limped together into her house and up the stairs. Silverfoot was spending the night in Shane's clinic. Carmen could barely put one foot in front of the other, but when Dash drew her into the shower with him and tenderly washed her from head to toe, she returned the favor, running her hands over the smooth skin and taut muscle she'd never thought she'd have the chance to touch again.

Finally, they dried each other off then tumbled into bed in a warm tangle of limbs.

"I want to make love to you more than anything in the world," Dash murmured. "But I don't think either of us can stay awake long enough."

"I'll take a rain check," she replied, settling back against his chest, her bottom pressed against his groin. The warmth and strength of his arms wrapped around her made her feel safer than she'd ever felt, even after all they'd been through tonight. "As soon as we wake up though, you're all mine."

"Honey, I'm all yours, period," he said against her hair. The last words she heard before she drifted off into exhausted slumber were, "Love you."

* * * * *

When she woke several hours later, the sun was streaming in through her window and Dash was still holding her.

"Good morning," he said, nuzzling her ear. "How are you feeling?"

"A little bruised and battered, but lucky as hell that we're both alive. You?"

"The same. Leg hurts like a bitch, but it's been worse."

She knew he had an enormous bruise on his stomach where he'd been shot. Thank god for his bullet-proof vest. There was another on his cheekbone where Arroyo had kicked him. Rolling over, she looked up at him then leaned up to kiss the bruise on the side of his face. "I almost died myself when I heard him shoot you."

"I know. How do you think I felt when he set the damn house on fire with you inside it?"

His lips crushed down on hers, fierce and hungry and Carmen didn't want to talk anymore. All that mattered was they were here, together. Dash seemed to feel the same. He'd never been like this, so urgent he was almost rough, though he still took care not to hurt her. As their mouths tangled, he slid one hand between her legs, finding her pussy already soaked. Waking up with him always made her wet. With a low moan of approval into her mouth, he rolled her onto her back, settled between her splayed legs and replaced his hand with the blunt crest of his cock.

Carmen wasn't interested in preliminaries either, not this time. She was the one moaning as he took her with one strong thrust, stabbing deep into her core. He held himself there for a bit, not moving as they continued to eat at each other's lips. Digging her fingers into the strong muscles of his shoulder, she held him close. His weight pressing her into the mattress was wonderful, and she canted her hips, wrapping her calves around his thighs to take him even deeper.

Finally, he ended the kiss and began to move. She couldn't exactly see him gazing into her eyes, but she knew he was. "I love you, Carmen Whitefeather." His tone was hushed, almost reverent. "I know it's soon but I can't help it. What I feel for you is more than I ever thought I could feel."

She slid a hand up to his cheek. "I love you too, Dash. Timing doesn't matter. Loving does."

"God, sweetheart, you're so damn tight." He slid in and out of her channel, dragging against her tender clit with every stroke. Carmen pressed upward to meet each thrust, mindless in her need to meld with Dash. There was no sweetness in this

coupling, just mating, raw, mindless and primitive. Carmen loved it. She didn't even try to stifle her cries of pleasure or hide the tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. She just stared up at him and let her love for the man flow through her body as they strained together.

Just as her muscles clenched around him and her body detonated in mindless pleasure, she felt the hot, wet spurt of his release inside her cunt. They were protected, so she wasn't worried, but the lack of a latex barrier somehow added to the intimacy of the moment. When their orgasms subsided, Dash rolled them to their sides, his softening cock still tucked inside her.

"I'm never letting you go, you know," he murmured, kissing the top of her head. This had been the first time in his life he'd had sex without a condom, but with Carmen, it just felt like coming home. "Can you live with that?"

"Mmm-hmm." She rubbed her cheek against his chest, the softness of her skin amazing him all over again.

"So, I guess I have to go ahead and build a house..." he began, letting his voice trail off.

"Or," she interrupted, "we could just add on to this one."

"I was thinking about that too," he admitted. "Add an office for me and a studio for you on the first floor then a couple extra bedrooms upstairs."

"And what would we do with all that extra space?" Her voice was teasing and she tickled his spine lightly.

"Well, I was thinking maybe in a year or two we could think about filling the extra bedrooms with a couple of kids." There it was, he'd laid his dream of the future open for her to accept or reject, and he held his breath, waiting for her response.

Slowly, she nodded against his chest. "We could do that. Only one problem I can think of." A soft giggle punctuated her final words.

His tension relaxed. She wasn't turning him down. "What problem is that?"

"Well," she teased, "you see, my grandfather has this big-ass shotgun..."

Dash laughed at the sheer joy flooding his system. He shifted them so he could look into her beautiful eyes. He knew that she could sense his regard even if she couldn't clearly see him back. "Carmen Whitefeather, will you marry me? Share your home, your life, maybe even someday a family with me?"

She lifted her lips and placed a kiss on his. "Of course I will, Dash. I love you with all my heart."

"Then that makes me the luckiest man alive," he murmured. Later, after he'd kissed her thoroughly, he said, "You sure you want a man who doesn't even own a shirt for his back?"

Carmen's soft, sweet laugh answered him. "I like you better naked anyway."

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, they dragged themselves out of bed long enough to run into town and replenish Dash's wardrobe a bit. They also had to talk to the cops again. At least his wallet and cell phone had survived the fire, along with his boots and jeans. Ken had dropped by to feed the animals while they slept and had left a clean shirt on the kitchen table. Thankfully, since both truck and house were ranch property, Leah had already called the insurer about those. Since he'd decided to stay, Dash figured he'd better buy a vehicle of his own anyway, but that would wait for another day. Today, he simply rented a loaner from the local dealership.

Finally, they found themselves at Hell's Bells, surrounded by friends and family who'd come to celebrate Leah and Shane's return. Mac had set a table for the family right next to the bandstand, and of course he dragged the newlyweds up onto the stage for a toast. Once all the cheers and kissing had finished, Shane and Leah sat down, but Mac stayed at the microphone.

"Now, y'all might have heard that we have a bona fide hero with us tonight. Let's hear it for my long-lost brother Dash Hyde, who faced down a killer and ran into a burning building to rescue one of Morgan's Creek's own."

Dash felt his skin heat with a flush that probably went down to his toes as the room erupted into a cacophony of whistles, stomping and cheering.

"Dash, buddy, get on up here and talk to the folks."

Carmen kicked him and nodded, and Leah and Shane both yelled his name. Reluctantly, Dash stood, but before he went, he grabbed Carmen by the hand and dragged her with him up the two steps to the small stage.

"All right, all right. I did what I had to do, what any man in this room would have done if it was his woman in that house."

That brought out another round of cheers, though this one was mixed with laughter.

"Seriously," Dash said, feeling his throat constrict at the raucous welcome these people had shown them. "I'm really glad you seem to approve, because as it turns out, I'm going to be staying right here in Morgan's Creek." He waited through another round of applause then looked at Carmen and squeezed her hand. "Seems this is where my wife is going to be."

This time the room fairly exploded with sound. When Dash and Carmen left the stage, one of Mac's employees was passing out glasses of champagne, and Mac led another toast, this one to the newly engaged couple. For the next half-hour, Dash and Carmen sat in their chairs as groups of townsfolk came up to congratulate them and wish them well. Dash was told over and over how glad they were to have him stay, and his heart overflowed. Not only had he found the love of his life, he'd found a place he could truly call home.

A few hours later, both still wiped from all the turmoil of the last couple of days, he lay beside Carmen in their big, warm bed.

"The wedding has to be soon," he said, playing with a lock of her straight, silky hair.

"Fine by me," she murmured sleepily. "We can run up to Vegas tomorrow for all I care. Or let Leah put it on at the ranch in oh, three weeks or so. Whatever you want. As long as we're together, I'm easy."

"As long as you're only easy for me, that's good," he said. "And I think having a small wedding at the ranch is a great idea. You see, your grandfather has this big-ass shotgun..."

About the Author

Cindy Spencer Pape has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher and an elected politician, though she swears she got better. Her degrees are in zoology and she currently works in environmental education, when she can fit it in around writing. She lives in southern Michigan with her husband, two teenage sons, a dog, a lizard and various other small creatures, all of which are easier to clean up after than the three male humans.

Cindy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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